

*Matthew 6:24-34*

*2 Pentecost*

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It seems hardly fair that worrying, which is one of the most natural things we do, turns out to be a complete waste of time. Much of our anxiety focuses on future possibilities, on awful things which might take place. A loved one might develop a terrible disease. The stock market might crash. The whole altar guild might resign en masse. Not only can we not control these things, but in many cases they don't even come to pass. Winston Churchill once quoted a friend of his as saying, "I've had so much trouble in my life, and most of it never happened." Prudent planning can be wise, but worrying is simply wasted energy, something which Jesus understands: *Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?* Well, no, but we do it anyway, and therein lies the challenge.

If the only thing Jesus did in this Gospel today were to point out how unproductive our anxiety is, then we might not find that very helpful. But he offers two insights into worrying that can change our lives for the better, if we will only take them to heart. The first concerns the very source of anxiety. You may not be aware that the words "anxiety" and "worry" both derive from words which mean "to strangle." That seems quite appropriate since we know how constricting anxiety is, how much worrying can literally choke us up. But as it happens, the Greek word used in the New Testament has nothing to do with strangling. The verb used here, *μεριμνάω*, literally means "to have a divided mind." That's not just an interesting piece of etymology: it gets at the heart of what Jesus teaches about anxiety. We worry, he says, because we have a divided mind. So, for example, in this passage from his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses the way people worry about material possessions, and he begins with a simple assertion: *No one can serve two masters . . . You cannot serve God and wealth.* You cannot have a divided mind and be free from worry.

The problem then and now is that people do try to serve God and wealth. In fact, serving God is just one concern out of many that we have: we want our families to thrive; we want to succeed in our chosen vocation; we want to live in a nice home and drive a nice car; we want to have plenty of money for retirement. And at the same time we want to make the world a better place, care for the poor, promote justice and peace, protect the environment. We've got much on our mind, and so, yes, we worry. We're a lot like Martha, and what Jesus says to her just underlines the message of the Gospel today: *Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.*

Which leads to Jesus' second insight into anxiety, which is how to stop it. After recognizing that our divided minds worry too much, he offers a life-giving alternative: *Strive first for the kingdom of God and its righteousness.* Cultivate a single-minded focus on what matters most, and everything else will fall into place — and we will be at peace.

God knows that we love our families and care about many people and projects. God knows we need the necessities of life. Jesus does not suggest that we should forget about these things. But he is adamant that we need to put first things first. If we're created to love God and love others, if we understand ourselves first and foremost to be agents of God's saving work in the world, then we should live accordingly: that

should be our highest priority. It's not only the way to be more fruitful, it's the way to be less anxious. I know for myself when I am juggling the many and various demands of parish ministry and family life and everything else, it's easy to worry because there's so much going on, so many people and programs I care about, so much that could go wrong. I have found over and over that the one thing that diminishes anxiety and helps me live in peace is deliberately keeping Christ at the center of everything, my highest priority. When I let him be Lord, then whether I'm leading worship or attending a meeting or playing with my children, I accomplish more and I worry less. I know God's in charge, and will be, no matter what. It's when I lose that Christ-centered focus that I feel scattered and anxious. Striving first for the kingdom of God is not just a nice, holy idea: it is sound, practical advice for wholesome living.

And when people realize that, it changes lives. On Friday, I attended the funeral of Glenn Anderson, our own Greg Anderson's brother. He died too young, but the funeral was a wonderful tribute to him. He was, by all accounts, a marvelous teacher and coach. He carried in his wallet a meditation he had once read in *Forward Day by Day*. It had obviously influenced him deeply, so much so that he used to read it to the girls on his soccer team at the end of every season. It was printed on the back of the funeral bulletin, and during the service, his daughter read it to us. It's a commentary on Ephesians 4, which says that some will be prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, and it speaks to the Gospel message today:

Many people, including myself, have gone through life searching endlessly for the "one" path God has set out for them. It has often been common belief that the only way to be content is to find this specific place in life. It has become apparent to me, however, that life is full of many choices. Yet no matter what decisions we make, as long as they are made with the right intention, we will find God. Using precious energy worrying about which choice to make, and regretting choices already made, only keeps us away from our true mission: to spread the love that God has made known to us through Jesus Christ.

Reaching out and touching the lives of others with our words, our prayers, and our presence is the key to God, and the key to eternal peace in the kingdom of love. No matter what successes and failures we've had, if our existence has inspired even one person to be great, if our existence has touched the life of just one person, then living has been worth it. Have no fear. In time, God will guide us all to where we are meant to be.

Have no fear. Strive first for the kingdom of God, and God will keep us in peace.