

“Can Worry Add Life”

Matthew 6:24-34

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“Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?”

Jesus’ question might as well be a live worm on a hook—says Anglican preacher Barbara Brown Taylor. Because the minute you answer Jesus’ question you’re a goner. You can argue with Jesus all you like—tell him that worrying about your weight gets you to the gym, or that worrying about your job prospects makes you study harder—but can you say for sure that this will add an hour to your life? No, you can’t, which is why you are hooked—so hooked that you can already guess what is coming next. Why do you worry then? Why are you so anxious? That is what Jesus really wants to know, and for some of us it is the question of a lifetime.

We live in a world filled with anxiety—and it rubs off on us. The poet, W. H. Auden in 1948 famously dubbed that period, “the Age of Anxiety.” So what do we call now—the age of **High** Anxiety? A pandemic, war, inflation, mortgage rate hikes, climate change, political divisions and phenomenal change. Yet it’s also clear from Jesus’ attention to the subject, that worry has been an unwelcome guest in human hearts and minds for a very long time. It’s telling that Jesus’ longest discourse on a human emotion is about worry. Not sadness, not fear, not grief, not loneliness—**WORRY!**

Even though as Daniel Gardner says that we are the healthiest, wealthiest and longest-lived people in history—still we are increasingly anxious and afraid. To some, living without worry sounds as impossible as living without breathing.

But worry wears us down. The cheeky thing about Jesus’ little question is that we all know that worrying, rather than extending our lives—actually shortens them—significantly! We can worry ourselves to death. In one study (published in 2008) researchers at Purdue University followed 1,600 men, ages 43 to 91, for 12 years to examine how those with anxious personalities fared over time. At the end of the study, only 50 percent of the men with high or increasing anxiety were alive—compared to 75 to 85 percent of the less anxious group.

If you dig down to the root meaning of the word worry, the literal meaning is “to strangle.” When life gets you by the throat, the chances are it is worry that is doing the strangling. So we long for someone to free us from our worries. And this is why Jesus keeps repeating, “Do not worry.” Three times in this passage Jesus says, “Do not worry.” And it’s a refrain that bears repeating because worry is not easily banished.

Barbara Brown Taylor says she has a problem with Jesus on this question. She doesn’t think it is fair for Jesus to ask people about their anxiety level and then point to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field as models of trust in divine providence. She asks, “Do

birds of the air have mortgage payments? Do lilies of the field have aging parents who depend on them for long-term care? No, they do not. Only humans have problems like these, which goes a long way toward explaining why we, of all creatures, are the most anxious. Why do we worry? Because we are able to imagine a future we cannot control. We worry because we are afraid of losing what we love—of not having enough, or of not being enough.

But wait a minute, Barbara—Jesus actually does have a leg to stand on here. He spent a lot of time outside—he never had a house of his own. He watched birds wheeling around, high up on the currents of the Galilean Hills, simply enjoying being alive. As he walked from town to town he saw a thousand different kinds of flowers—and all this glorious God-given beauty. No gardener planted them. No one watered them. No one fretted over them. Yet God cared for them and supplied all that was needed. Jesus was in fact a kind of lily-of-the-field with no place to lay his head—which may be how he had learned first-hand about the provision of God and had gotten so wise about the futility of anxiety.

E. Stanley Jones, a great missionary and author in the last century, famously declared, “Worry is atheism”—because worry implies there is no God, or at least not a God who cares or a God who can act. Worry says, “It is all up to me.” Worry sings, “I’ve got the whole world in my hands.” It is the form of atheism that frets, “If I don’t do it, it’s not going to happen.” On one occasion, when Martin Luther was consumed with worry, his wife began to wear black. When Luther finally asked her why, she replied, “Haven’t you heard? God is dead.”

It’s not that Jesus says we shouldn’t think about the future or make provision for the future. After all, even the birds of the air—the very ones Jesus points to as examples of God’s care—build nests and migrate to warmer climates in anticipation of colder weather. What Jesus rebukes is not the planning, but the anxious worry.

And the prescription of Dr. Jesus—the great healer—for this affliction of worry is a generous daily dose of the goodness of this amazing heavenly Father and his great economy of grace. The old catechism says that our chief end (or purpose) is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. We need a daily dose of time-out to simply enjoy God and his generous goodness. To pause and simply enjoy the fresh scent of blooming Linden Trees. To stop and marvel at the beauty of a brilliant sunset. To be still and listen to summer bird song. To listen for the voice and word of the one who brings us new life—Easter life! To pray and give thanks before a meal for the goodness of food and be reminded again that everything we have is a gift from a heavenly Father who knows our needs even before we ask.

Truly the most important realities of our lives—are completely unearned, beyond our control and given to us for free. When we realize how much we have been given – a life, a beginning, complete forgiveness on the cross, a place in the kingdom of God – we become less anxious and more likely to want to give away some of our things, our time and our talents and we become happier whole and healed people in the process. A

given life is very different from a driven life – gratitude replenishes itself, as more is given, more is received.

Jesus seems to be calling us to a “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” kind of life. Remember that 1988 feel-good anthem “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” It transformed Bobby McFerrin into a household name, taking Grammy honours as song of the year and record of the year. But did you also hear that McFerrin had failed to heed his own advice and had killed himself instead? But that’s a lie—a lie we want to believe because we think that life without worry is impossible.

When Jesus says “don’t worry about what to eat, or drink or wear”—he doesn’t mean these things don’t matter—even the Lord’s prayer for daily bread. But Jesus says that it’s about what we put first in our lives. Put the world and its pressures and lures first and you’ll find it gets moth-eaten in your hands. Put God first—and you’ll get the world thrown in. If we set God’s Kingdom—God’s love and will as your goal, and the way of life that goes with it—then you’ll find that ample food, drink, and clothing look after themselves. As an old saying goes, “The charitable give out at the door and God puts in at the window.” The Father really does take care of his children.

The Message paraphrases: “Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God provisions. Don’t worry about missing out. You’ll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.” Today’s Gospel shows us another way, the great economy of grace where birds free and unfettered are careless in the care of God, who provides everything necessary. Gratitude is the foundation of faith in God as the creator and giver of all. As Mary Jo Leddy says: (Gratitude) awakens the imagination to another way of being, to another kind of economy, the great economy of grace in which each person is of infinite value and worth. As the ripples of gratitude expand in our lives, we come alive.

There’s a radical nature to this liberation that Jesus promises—to trust God with a whole and undivided heart—that sets us free to live our lives in joy, in grace and in complete confidence. And also the courage and freedom that comes from taking a first step towards a new future—even when the second and third are not yet in view.