



Overcoming Anxiety

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Matthew 6:25-34

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I am careful not to preach partisan politics from this pulpit. I do not endorse candidates or try to influence your vote. But I've been carrying around two concerns this week I can't seem to shake regarding the race for president. The first concern may be obvious but worth restating. The second concern is more subtle, but directly related to today's lesson.

My first concern addresses the precipitous loss of civility in our day. American politics has turned nasty and highly partisan. Enough, I say! Civil debate is a staple of American democracy. It's the only way our differences can be aired and taken seriously. The behavior of our politicians wouldn't pass muster in a kindergarten class. We teach six-year-olds to be nice on the playground and play fairly. Maybe we should send our politicians back to school to learn mutual forbearance and respect.

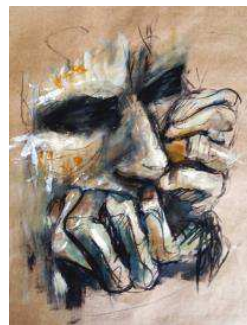
My second concern relates directly to today's lesson. We live in anxious times. Everything is changing so fast. Since the way forward seems unclear, we are tempted to panic. We have politicians on both sides of the aisle pandering to this highly reactive atmosphere. If they can keep us all spun up and fearful about America's future, they can leverage this anxiety for their political advantage. Whether it is terrorism and border security on the Republican side or global warming and Wall Street money barons on the Democratic side, the effect is the same. We will vote someone into the presidential office who will propose another round of overreacting, blaming and quick fixes.

We need leaders who, in the words of psychologist Edwin Friedman, "maintain a non-anxious presence in anxious times." We need well-differentiated leaders who do not

perpetuate anxiety but take steps to defuse it. We need leaders who exercise civility in their conduct of their office and can keep their heads when everybody else is losing theirs. I'll say more about our political climate later in this sermon.

Jesus is the epitome of a non-anxious leader. Let's look at what he says about worry in his Sermon on the Mount. He tells his congregation three times, in quick succession, "Do not worry." He says so at the outset of this passage, (verse 25), in the middle (verse 31) and again for a third time in his concluding comments (verse 34).

"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothes?"



Do not worry about your life 6.25

Do not worry about food...6.31

Do not worry about tomorrow 6.34

(6:25). Jesus says there is more to life than looking good and eating well.

Jesus delivers this sermon outdoors. I can imagine him gesturing to birds flying overhead, "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or gather into barns and yet your heavenly Father feeds them" (6:26).

Jesus invites his followers to become birdwatchers. Jesus' sermon is all about worry, not indolence. Birds don't wait for God to drop food into their nests. They show diligence in building their nests and caring for their young, yet they don't worry. They unconsciously go about their business accomplishing God's purposes for them. While they work hard for their food, they are carefree in God's care.

Jesus then asks two questions in successive verses: "Are you not much more valuable than they?" (6:26). The

pronoun “you” is spoken first in the sentence for reasons of emphasis. Are YOU not more valuable than they?

“Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to his life?” (6:27). I detect irony in the way Jesus asks this question. Worry doesn’t lengthen life; it shortens it. Worry gives us headaches, ulcers, high blood pressure, insomnia and any number of stomach ailments. “I’m worried sick” is truer than we might realize. Worry can take years off our lives. Both questions are rhetorical in nature; they imply an obvious answer.

Worrying is like a rocking chair.
It gives you something to do but
it doesn’t get you anywhere.



Most of the things we worry about never happen. Someone has said, “Worry is like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do, but doesn’t get you anywhere.” Can you

remember what you were worrying about on March 6th of last year? If you can, you may qualify as obsessive-compulsive which is definitely something to worry about.

Next, Jesus from his open-air pulpit directs his listeners to a second nature lesson. “See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his glory was dressed like one of these” (6:29). King Solomon may have looked regal in his royal attire, but only God can make a flower. And flowers don’t worry about the future.

“If this is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?” (6:30). This phrase “you of little faith” literally translates, “you little-faith ones.”

These two examples of birds and flowers are examples of what we call in Latin *a fortiori* arguments. *A fortiori* arguments move from lesser to greater emphasis. If God cares for lesser birds and flowers, how much more will he care for you?

Worry in the Greek has two essential meanings. The first meaning is to care and be concerned. God does not decry careful provision for the future. The second use of this word means to become full of care and overly concerned. It is the word Jesus uses in Matthew 6. There is a world of difference between careful provision for the future and undue worry.

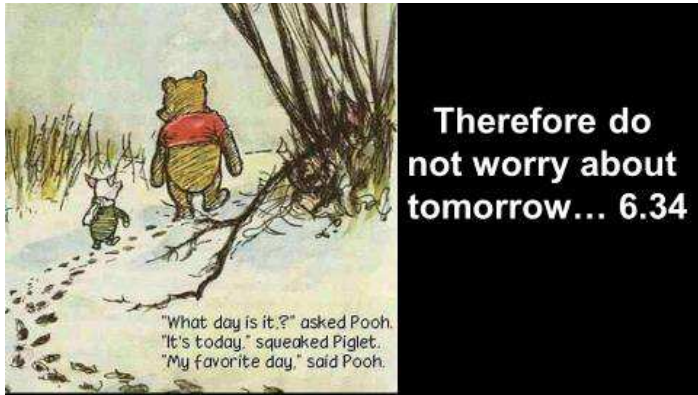
I came across this cartoon this week that is true more than it is humorous. We keep a lot of fortune tellers in business by asking them to speculate about our future. Maybe we should seek out truth-tellers who can tell us more about our *present* circumstances.



Jesus continues, “So, do not worry saying ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For unbelievers run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first God’s kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be yours as well” (6:31-33).

I talked about our current political climate at the outset of this sermon. Let me be clear about something. Politicians cannot save us. The state cannot make us safe and happy. No new savior in the White House can possibly deliver us. Politicians continually overpromise; only Jesus delivers.

It's going to be okay, folks, God is on His holy throne. We've read the end of the good book. Christ will triumph in the end. This world is a perfectly safe place because "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). Our hope centers on our Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing can separate us from his love! Not ISIS, not terrorism; nothing!



Jesus finishes his message on worry with the words, "Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself; each day has enough trouble of its own" (6:34). If the only day we have is today, then you could say that tomorrow never comes. It's always today and never tomorrow!

Let me speak for a moment to those of you who worry and may struggle with anxiety. One in five Americans are treated for some form of anxiety disorder. What Jesus is talking about in his sermon is not merely academic.

Maybe you are worrying about your job—keeping your job, finding a new job, quitting your job, wishing you were still working or deciding whether to retire.

Maybe you worry about your housing—finding an affordable place to live, buying or selling your place, paying for it or are contemplating downsizing.

Maybe you are worrying about school—grades, exams, getting into the right college or grad school. Maybe you are anxious about whether people like you at school.

Maybe you worry about the people in your life—family or friends, classmates or work colleagues.

Maybe you are worrying about your health, money, weight or appearance. Have I missed anyone? All of us worry about something.

Let me share a Scripture passage that parallels the one we've been considering from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. This verse is one sentence long so you can write it down and take it with you. It won't take much effort for you to commit it to memory. "Cast all your worries on God because He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7).



There is an old story about a man walking down the road with a heavy burden on his back. A farmer with a horse and wagon pulls up next to the man and offers him a ride. The man carrying the burden gladly climbs into the wagon but continues to hold the heavy load on his shoulders. The farmer asks the man why he doesn't lay his burden down in the wagon. The man tells him that he doesn't want to burden the horse any more than it is already burdened.

The morale of the story is abundantly clear. The burden is the same to the horse, whether the man keeps it on his shoulders or lays it down in the wagon. Why do you insist on carrying your burdens when you can lay them down?

Jesus said, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-30).

Some of you today are carrying heavy burdens. Lay your burdens down. The antidote for worry is trust. Trust your future to God's benevolent care. Let the birds and flowers become our teachers.



**Come to me
all you who are weary
and burdened
and I will give you rest.
Mt. 11.28**