

“When Jesus Saying 'Don't Worry' Only Makes It Worse”
Lent 2015: I'm Not Okay
Sermon on Matthew 6:25-34 (3/7 & 3/8/15)
Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck

I would like to hazard a guess that our reading from Matthew 6 stirred up some interesting reactions as we heard it read a moment ago. I'm going to read it again...and, as I read, pay attention to what it *does* to you as I read – pay attention to what it makes you think and feel:

Jesus said, “I tell you not to worry about your life. Don't worry about having something to eat, drink, or wear. Isn't life more than food or clothing? Look at the birds in the sky! They don't plant or harvest. They don't even store grain in barns. “Yet your Father in heaven takes care of them. Aren't you worth more than birds? Can worry make you live longer? Why worry about clothes?”

“Look how the wild flowers grow. They don't work hard to make their clothes. But I tell you that Solomon with all his wealth wasn't as well clothed as one of them. God gives such beauty to everything that grows in the fields, even though it is here today and thrown into a fire tomorrow. He will surely do even more for you! Why do you have such little faith?”

“Don't worry and ask yourselves, 'Will we have anything to eat? Will we have anything to drink? Will we have any clothes to wear?' Only people who don't know God are always worrying about such things. Your Father in heaven knows that you need all of these. But more than anything else, put God's work first and do what he wants. Then the other things will be yours as well.

“Don't worry about tomorrow. It will take care of itself. You have enough to worry about today.”

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So, you got it, right? The theme of this passage is pretty clear: DON'T WORRY. It is repeated over and over and over and over and over and over again in these verses.

“I tell you not to worry about your life. Don't worry about having something to eat, drink, or wear ... Can worry make you live longer? Why worry about clothes? ... Don't worry and ask yourselves, 'Will we have anything to eat?’

“Will we have anything to drink? Will we have any clothes to wear?’ Only people who don't know God are always worrying about such things ...

“Don't worry about tomorrow. It will take care of itself. You have enough to worry about today.”

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DON'T WORRY. Simple. Just don't worry. Don't do it. Case closed.

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I asked you to pay attention to what this passage of Scripture did to you as I read it – I asked you to pay attention to your reaction...what you felt, what you thought.

Well, *my* initial reaction to this passage is that I end up adding “stop worrying” to the list of things I worry about.

I hear Jesus' repeated refrain “don't worry” and I feel guilty for worrying about things like food and clothing – not to mention a whole host of other things I worry about that Jesus fails to mention here. //

Now, I don't worry about how I will *afford* food and clothing; having enough money to pay for food and clothing is not an issue for me. My fridge and pantry are well-stocked...yet I often look with disdain at their contents and choose instead to order take-out.

And my closet offers me abundant options for how to decorate myself with various shirts, sweaters, pants, dresses, and jackets...yet I often look at all of my clothes and sneer. Just the other night I wasted a good 30 minutes going through about five different outfits as I settled on something to wear out for a casual meal.

This is too dressy...this is too casual...these jeans don't look right with this cardigan... this shirt is too tight and draws attention to some tummy flab...oh, great – now I'm depressed about my recent lack of exercise. Since it's finally getting warmer, maybe I'll actually get outside to do some running...get rid of those obnoxious ten pounds. Stupid, clingy shirt. WHY ARE ALL OF MY CLOTHES AWFUL???

(Surely many of you are familiar with this internal dialogue in some way, shape, or form. It leads nowhere good.)

I have the luxury of choosing all sorts of options for food and clothing – so I worry about making the *right* choices for myself and my image.

But then I remember there are plenty of people in this community and beyond who do *not* have enough money to have the luxury of choice when it comes to food and clothing...and then I feel guilty and I worry about having too much. So *I* read these words of Jesus and then I worry about *worrying*.

Sometimes, hearing or reading Jesus say “Don't worry” just makes everything worse. Know what I mean?

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A couple of weeks ago, on Ash Wednesday, we began a sermon and worship series here at McCabe called “I'm Not Okay.”

We got the title and concept for this series from a sister United Methodist congregation in Sioux Falls...and it's such an appropriate series for Lent.

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The 40-day season of Lent is a journey toward the cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter Sunday. Lent is a time when we seek forgiveness for the sin that nailed Jesus to the cross. It's also a time when we seek God's guidance and presence in the midst of our own brokenness.

Life on earth is messy and complex – filled with joy and sorrow, excitement and disappointment. When people ask us how we are, so often we instinctively reply with a simple, “I'm okay. Everything is fine.” Even when we are *not* okay and even when everything is *not* fine. Well, Lent is a perfect time for us to prayerfully and intentionally reflect on the ways in which we are *not* okay. And, of course, Lent is a perfect time for us to put before God all that makes us “not okay.”

Because we worship a God who is with us in our brokenness...we follow a Savior who took our brokenness upon himself on the cross...and, by our Savior's resurrection from the dead, God declares to us that there is *hope* in all things. That, even when we are not okay – we *will* be... eventually.

While Jesus' repeated refrain in today's reading from Matthew chapter six is “Don't worry,” *our* repeated refrain for this “I'm Not Okay” series is that: “Even when we are not okay – we will be...eventually.” God will make it so. That's the promise of Easter. And we're getting closer to Easter every day. //

On Ash Wednesday, as we began this series, we talked about temptation. On the first Sunday in Lent, we thought about what it means to trust – to relax into the assurance of God's love for us – even in the midst of serious doubt and faith questions. Last weekend the theme was sickness and healing...today it's worry and fear over the future...next week, we'll look at how we so easily judge ourselves and others...we'll talk about loss and grief.

There are so many ways in which we are *not* okay. And if you discover anything throughout this series, I hope it's that, when you are *not* okay, you are welcome here. When we come here for worship, we should come prepared to bring *all* that we are Jesus: all of our gratitude, all of our confession, all of our pain, all of our sorrow, all of our worry and fear.

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In today's passage from Matthew six, Jesus talks specifically about money-related worries: food, drink, clothing. There was a time in my life as a full-time pastor when I worried a lot about money...but not because I didn't have enough for what I needed. The years I worried about money, the worry was self-inflicted because my spending priorities were way out of whack.

I made sure to give at least 10% of my income back to God through the churches I was serving, but I paid little to no attention to the fact that, month after month, far more was going out than was coming in. Credit card and other types of debt mounted because I constantly overspent on food, clothing, and travel.

After making some critical shifts in my spending back in 2008, I got healthier financially and I stopped worrying so much about money. I paid off my last debt back in August, which was a wonderful weight to release, but now I've found that a host of *other* worries sometimes creep in:

How long will it take me to save up for a new car? Will I be able to do it before my current car dies on me? What about retirement – how much do I need to put away so I'll have enough down the road? And what if I have some sort of major medical or other emergency?

Christian financial expert Dave Ramsey told me to save 3-6 months worth of expenses for just such a time as that, but I haven't done it yet...am I pushing my luck???

I thought that, when I paid off my last debt, I would magically stop worrying about money. But that's not how it works, is it? Sometimes our worries are situational – and, if the situation changes for the better, the worry disappears. For many of us, however, *worry* is a way of life.

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As I've already said, life on earth is messy and complex. There is a lot that happens that is seemingly worth worrying about: health issues and critical diagnoses...family messes...relationship struggles and fall-outs... children who are having a hard time...parents who can no longer take care of themselves...problems at school or work...not to mention geopolitical affairs and the ever-present drums of war.

Jesus says “don't worry” *not* because there is nothing in our world worth worrying about.

Of all people, our Lord and Savior understood that there are all *sorts* of things in this world worth worrying about...and every single one of our worries was nailed with him to the cross on that first Good Friday. When, on Easter Sunday, Jesus rose from the dead, God redeemed each of our worries...but not by eliminating them from life on earth.

The empty tomb of Easter doesn't mean that everything will be fine and dandy in this life. No. What it means is far greater than that. The empty tomb of Easter means that God is with us in our worry and our fear...that God is constantly working to redeem it...and that, somehow, all we worry about will turn out all right in the end.

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When I'm searching for inspiration as I think through my weekly sermons, in addition to prayer and studying the particular Scripture reading on which I'll be preaching, I often go to another fountain of never-ending wisdom: the internet. So, this past week, I Googled the word "worry" just for fun...to see what would come up.

And I encountered some great quotes about worry – quotes that seem to echo the spirit of Jesus' own words from Matthew six...I found three I particularly liked:

The first quote was, "Do not believe everything you think." Uff-da. That one hits home for me. *"Do not believe everything you think."*

I also loved this quote: "Worrying is like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do, but it doesn't get you anywhere." Pretty accurate, I'd say. *"Worrying is like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do, but it doesn't get you anywhere."*

This third and final quote struck me as particularly fitting with Jesus's words from Matthew six: "Worrying does not take away tomorrow's troubles: it takes away today's peace." *"Worrying does not take away tomorrow's troubles: it takes away today's peace." //*

As I said a bit ago, Jesus tells us "don't worry" not because there is nothing worth worrying about in this life. He knows our fears, our doubts, our pain. Jesus knows our worries. But he also knows something far greater than our worries and our fears.

See, when we worry, we fail to internalize the good news Jesus offers in today's Scripture reading. Yes, sometimes when we hear him say, "Don't worry," it just makes everything worse.

"Don't worry" can feel harsh. After all, he says it about a million times in these nine verses of Scripture! "Don't worry, don't worry, don't worry, don't worry!!!" It almost feels like he's scolding us. But we have to remember there's much more to Jesus' message from these nine verses.

Because, after Jesus says, "Don't worry," he says, "your heavenly Father knows what you need." *That's* the good news today and always...as hard as it can be to internalize: Don't worry. God knows what you need.

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Jesus knows our worries and our fears.

But far more important than anything we can ever worry about, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ also knows and trusts God's providence...he knew that in *everything* God would provide for *his* needs and he knows that in everything God will provide for our needs.

It's mysterious. And God's provision doesn't always come in the *way*, or at the *time*, we hope it will come. But God *does* provide.

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If you happen to be in a season of deep worry right now, look for the people and the situations that calm you – give thanks for the moments of joy and levity, for they are moments when God is being revealed to you.

And if you happen *not* to be in a season of deep worry right now, pay attention to those who are. Ask God to work through you that *you* might be someone's source of help and strength.

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Worries and fears come and go, yet God's presence and provision remain constant. Good news today, tomorrow, and always.