

What's Worth Worry

Isaiah 1: 10-17

Luke 12: 22-34

It seems like people of faith can set up the idea of worry against the demand of faith, as in, “you should not worry; you should have faith.” Implicitly, if you worry, you’re not being faithful and that would be sinful. Well, that’s just plain wrong.

The function of worry or concern or even doubt has a rightful and helpful place in our lives and attitudes. Worry is having anxiety about something. If you’ve entered a pitch black place and you can’t see anything all around you, you’d be an idiot not to be anxious and worried. If you see a snake and can’t readily identify it, it seems pretty natural to worry about whether it’s harmful or not. That’s simply a matter of safety.

Worry, doubt, and anxiety get us thinking. If we see the potential for problems, we can plan ways to deal with them, and hopefully overcome them. If we see how something could go wrong, we reflect and consider different ways of approaching the problem. We can play out all kinds of scenarios. It’s good preparation. And all of it is based on some worry.

Worry can be problematic, of course, when it’s either misdirected or obsessive, or both. I think we all know what this is since we’ve all done it sometime.

For me, that obsessive worrying happens when there is inadequate information to understand how something might play out, something big and potentially ugly. That causes me to turn over various scenarios endlessly because the range of possibilities is nearly endless. I never get that peace that comes from feeling that I’m as prepared as I could be. When I feel like I’ve got a handle on what could be coming, I can let go of the anxiety for the most part.

Worrying can also be misdirected. This is when we focus our attentions on something trivial or irrelevant, or something over which we have no control, or something that we can’t change, influence, or impact, or something that’s easily resolved or satisfied. This is really pointless worrying; it serves no worthwhile purpose.

We know this stuff, and we know it well from a lifetime of experience, and yet it’s amazing how much we can let our worries drive us to distraction. This isn’t anything modern or contemporary since we can hear words from Jesus that make it clear that 1st century people were no different.

Today’s lesson in Luke picks up where we left off last week with the parable of the rich fool and the question of the worth of wealth. We recognized that worldly wealth is a measurable but temporary, even fragile commodity. Kingdom wealth consists in actions that are impossible to measure, to store up, or to possess. In fact, true wealth in the Kingdom comes from **giving** rather than **receiving**.

Jesus can easily read the mind of his audience as he teaches about the nature of true wealth. Their collective question, like a cartoon bubble above their heads, is like this. *Treasure in heaven is fine, but what about taking care of my needs right now – today, and tomorrow, and the next day? I worry about my basic needs. How can I be concerned about these lovely Kingdom ideas when I have these real immediate needs that demand my attention?*

Jesus is all over this. What has been left out of the hypothetical question in his audience's mind? Jesus will fill in the missing piece.

Jesus starts with priorities. What is life, its fulfillment, meaning, and purpose? *Life is more than food, and the body more than clothing*, he reminds them. The response in the audience's mind is that 'you don't have much life without food and clothing, right Jesus?' The Teacher points to ravens, birds in general. They're taken care of without any concerns. Why do the ravens have none of these concerns? Because **God feeds them**.

There is the missing element in the audience's thought process. They haven't considered God's role in providing the creation with abundance, with God's caring and compassion for the creatures. And if God has taken care of the birds, Jesus teaches: *Of how much more value are you than the birds!*

Your worrying about such things, about most things, doesn't actually change anything.

Jesus notes that if you can't change the small, basic stuff, you certainly won't benefit from worrying about the big stuff.

The point is clear enough: You truly gain nothing from worrying about life's needs, large or small. But Jesus isn't quite done yet.

He returns to a nature metaphor, pointing to the "lilies" that grow in the wild. They're beautiful and well provided for, and they aren't worried about anything. Do the wildflowers know as much as you, that in life's cycle, there is life, waning and withering, and then dying? Do they resist it and strive for more or better, worrying about getting, keeping, and gaining more? Or do they savor their time, carefree and enjoying the abundant blessing of their Creator?

O ye of little faith! If you're truly faithful, then you will understand the nature of the Kingdom whose ways are so completely different from the ways and values of the world. The Kingdom lessons for those people were no easier for them to comprehend than it is for us.

Here comes the punch line that continues to throw off disciples to this day. *Sell your possessions, and give to the poor*. If the faithful truly believe that God provides for their needs, then they are freed to address the sinfulness of the world. Indeed, they're empowered to do so.

Jesus returns them to setting one's treasure in Kingdom values; selling off what you hold onto, and creating blessings for the poor. Faithfulness here is an act of healing. The Kingdom work of the faithful brings healing and restoration to the creation, returning life and value to what God had intended for creation and its creatures.

We miss the point if we remain focused on individual terms, as our society and our Christian traditions tend to do. We individualize salvation and sinfulness almost exclusively; it's about me and my salvation, or it's about this or that sinful conduct or action by an individual. We can hardly see beyond the singular individual.

What we hear from Jesus is that the Kingdom is not so much about individuals *per se* as it is about the whole of God's creation, about individuals empowered to act to bring healing and new life.

We even think of healing as purely individual, just as we think of new life as an individual blessing. **Think bigger**, because God and Jesus have certainly been teaching in the scope of a far bigger picture that we often refuse to recognize.

In First Isaiah, as with many of the prophets, we find that broader scope of ministry. Prophets do not speak to individuals. They address nations, states, and peoples, confronting nations, states, and peoples with their sinfulness and their need to be faithful to God and the Kingdom.

In Isaiah, God's people are in a persistent state of worry. They're a small nation, yet quite prosperous and strategic. Therefore they're quite coveted for acquisition by a greater power. Between its own military, its ability to make alliances, and its deep pockets that could buy off a threat with tribute, they manage to persevere for quite a while. But you can imagine that it's a regular state of anxiety as threats come regularly from all corners.

Isaiah begins by describing God's people as rebellious children, rejecting the lessons of their youth in order to pursue corruption and sinfulness. The people have not responded to various punishments inflicted upon them. Beaten on the head, struck in the heart, covered in bruises, wounds, and open sores, the people seem to have learned nothing. What shall become of them? Shall they be like Sodom and Gomorrah, destroyed for their refusal to turn in faithfulness to God?

So Isaiah begins our selection: *Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!* That's definitely a threat, recalling the sinful cities destroyed by God for their corruption and sinfulness.

Isaiah launches into a denunciation of their worship, denying the value of generous sacrifices and offerings made in the Temple. God also can't stand their devotion to holy days and seasons, disdains their prayers, and is disgusted by everything they do.

They seem to sincerely want the promise of God to go with them. They're devoted in most typical ways a faithful person would show their obedience and good conduct. But God rejects every bit of it.

The prophet tells God's people: *Your hands are full of blood.* This isn't the blood of sacrifices; it's the blood of corruption, of violence and injustice. It recalls the blood of Abel who was murdered by his brother Cain. God had said then in challenge to the sinful Cain who was hedging: *Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.* Like the sinful brother Cain, like the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah – all of whom were condemned to severe punishment – God's people inspire God's punishment anew.

Connecting the thread of worry, we can imagine the solid devotion to worship by God's people, their prayer and generous sacrifices and offerings. They reach out to God in their anxiety about their future. God had always enabled them to continue in good times and bad times, enabling them to continue a degree of independence and prosperity amid threats that seem to grow ever larger and more powerful.

In their state of personal concern for their own well-being, anxious and stressed that their God should remain their protector, God has a word for them through Isaiah:

*Seek justice; encourage the oppressed;
Defend the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.*

The people are worried about their own future, but they've given no thought to the oppression and injustice, the violence and the exploitation that's characterized their society. They've individualized their salvation in a sense, disconnecting it from the realities of sinfulness that are all around them. This is sinfulness that afflicts and condemns their brothers and sisters, whose blood is on their hands, believe it or not.

Yes, God's people have been blessed in many ways, but the prophet announces God's denunciation of their false piety. It's worship without substance, words without meaning, acts without spirit. In their worry about themselves, in keeping what they have, in being protected from harms and threats, they've ignored the harms and threats to their own neighbors. It's as if those people don't count, don't matter. They do matter. They matter to God who has seen their plight. The people of God fail to recognize the needs of their neighbors. They have no apparent interest in serving the Kingdom values of justice and peace, of compassion and love, of grace and forgiveness. It means that they're worrying about the wrong thing completely.

Focus on the values of the Kingdom, setting for yourself treasure in heaven, Jesus said. Worry about how we are doing as a people and as a society, prophesied Isaiah, for we've taken the blessings of abundance in God's creation and corrupted this to create riches and poverty, to create the powerful and the weak, and to design exploitation and the exploited, victors and victims.

The proper focus of our worry should be about those whom no one really seems too worried, who may get prayed for but to whom no one is ever too interested in ministering. Those are ones and those are the situations that God is concerned with. God wants to know why we're so concerned about getting worship done, why we're so worried about ourselves, when we accept sinfulness in social systems and designs that reeks up our noses every day.