

From the Community Pulpit
“Letting Go of Anxiety”

#1 in the “FIRST THINGS FIRST” series

Text: Matthew 6:25-34

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Sunday, January 2, 2011

8:30 a.m. (Chapel), 9:20 a.m. and 10:45 am (Sanctuary)

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Happy New Year! On the surface of things, the passing of a day on a calendar is a rather lackluster event. But human beings, time-keepers that we are, love to mark particular days – birthdays, anniversaries, etc. – with such attention. The arrival of a New Year is a special marking-time occasion. Parties, confetti, fireworks, parades, football games, resolution-making, and general festivities mark New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day as one of the most cranked-up occasions of revelry in our culture.

It’s helpful to have a purpose-shaped focus for the acknowledgment of the passing of time. In religious terms, the marking of time as special and holy, as part of the overall discovery of the holy, is called “hagiology”.

On the second day after the dawning of a new year, rather than urging you to craft some new New Year’s resolutions, I offer a sermon series, “FIRST THINGS FIRST.” focusing on key essentials of faith. These can surely provide us purpose and focus to shape our faith. And if we will attend and enact these essentials, I believe we all will have a Happy New Year and much, much more.

Our exploration of “first things” begins in the middle of Jesus’ most famous oration, the Sermon on the Mount. Whether you’re familiar with the Bible and you don’t know where to begin in the Bible, you are likely very familiar with Jesus’ words: “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or your body, what you will wear.”¹ This is a charge to let go of anxiety.

*When Concern Becomes Stress
 Which Becomes Worry
 Which Becomes Anxiety*

That we are concerned and fearful from time to time is obvious to most of us, if we are honest about ourselves and our place in the world. Being

concerned about the health of our families, the predicaments of our friends, the stability of our jobs, the growth of our faith, or the fulfillment of our dreams is natural and impossible to avoid. Our choices are not fearlessness as opposed to fretting. Our concerns about encountering threat or avoiding danger are real and help us live meaningful lives with purpose.

But when concern becomes agitated stress and grows into worry, we become counter-productive and less effective in handling our concerns. And then our worries can transmogrify into acute anxiety, panic, obsessions, and even phobias.

It's been proven scientifically that worry can debilitate our health, physically and mentally. My friend Forrest Church put it nicely: "... *worry eats away at the body while gnawing at the mind.*"² Robert Soplowski's research at Stanford University has revealed that chronic stress-related fear causes our adrenal glands to produce steroid hormones called "glucocorticoids."³ "Over a lifetime these hormones collect near the hippocampus, the region of the brain that stores memories and collaborates with the amygdala in outwitting danger. If after many years the hormones reach a certain level, they create a toxic atmosphere, impairing our capacity to recall memories and to perform certain tasks."⁴ Add to this the ill effects of worry raising our blood pressure, the bald truth reveals itself: Worry kills or, at the very least, reduces our years and the quality of our lives.

Jesus knew the profound reality of worry's potential to harm us and thus addressed its threat in his most famous sermon. His focus is curious, isn't it? Among the thousands of sermon possibilities Jesus had to choose from – a call for world peace, a challenge to fashion a global ministry of mercy, the need for world-wide human understanding – he chose to center in on worry and overcoming anxiety. Somehow Jesus knew – instinctively, intuitively, profoundly – that lower-level worries and seemingly small anxieties, if left untended and unremedied, can lead to larger problems. It is poetically appropriate that the origins of our English word "worry" are "to "choke" and to "strangle." Jesus knew that base level concerns which mutate into worrisome fears and chronic anxiety can choke and strangle the life out of us.

Anxiety About Basics

Jesus first addresses our anxieties about the basics. Food and drink. Obviously these base-line necessities need and deserve proper

consideration. But a culture that has spiking incidents of anorexia , bulimia, and childhood obesity and a world with one third of its inhabitants, many of them children, suffering from malnutrition and too little potable water are just the sorts that Jesus had in mind when he spoke about worrying.

And his remedy for such worry? An urging for us to look at the birds. Simply look at the birds. Now that would be a comical suggestion if it weren't so patently and powerfully revealing.

This week I had an occasion of doing just this sort of looking. Right in front of Brookside Market, before I got out of my trusty Jeep in order to enter the store in search of food and drink, three little sparrows appeared in the evergreen hedge in front of me. This was right at the time that the big chill was racing into Kansas City like a runaway train and causing fearsome chills in us all. And what were the birds doing. Nothing at all. Not chirping. Not singing. Not whining. Not flitting about. And certainly not worrying. Simply nesting in the evergreen, as if everything would be all right.

So I asked, "Aren't you cold?"

One of the birds, Seymour, spoke up and said, "Of course we are! Do we look like dumb birds?"

And then I responded, "But aren't you going to freeze to death being out in dastardly, harmful nature? Would you like to come home with me and stay in our garage?"

"Don't be silly," Seymour replied, "nature is our friend. That's why we're here in this evergreen bush. It will keep us warm just right. And there's no way we'd ever dream of using your garage. We'd starve to death in there. We have plenty of food to forage from if we stay out here in what you call 'dastardly, harmful nature.' Man, haven't you read any Wendell Berry?! Nature is our friend."

"But," I asked my final question, "doesn't nature every let you down?"

"Oh, wow, you really don't know anything, do you? God, who made all of nature, has always, always, taken care of us. And you call yourself a minister of the gospel of God!"

The gospel birds came all the way from the 6th chapter of Matthew to provide me, and indirectly you, with a basic truism about our basic being provided in the New Year 2011: We need not worry about what we will eat

or what we will drink. God will provide all that and more for sure. If we but look at the birds and have as much fundamental trust as they do.

Anxiety About Surface Issues

Jesus also mentions what seems to be a basic concern but can serve as a metaphor for our worrisome culture of obsession with outward appearance.

Now I'm not a person opposed to fashion. A good looking tie always catches my eye, and I have a closet full of them. And I always admire how all of you look so fetching each and every Sunday. Color and style and texture and material are part of the human equation. They are part of what makes us distinctly and peculiarly human. We are called to celebrate our individual preferences and choices. But they don't determine destiny.

When I think about the people who have made a huge difference in my life and those who also have made an impact on the world, I discover something strange and liberating: I can't remember one iota of distinctive flair, spangle, or "bling" in their fashion choices. My grandmother, Martin Luther King, Emily Dickinson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Mahatma Gandhi were surely some of the most boring dressers ever. How about you? Did anyone who profoundly effected your life ever do so by the clothes they wore?

Jesus said to the crowd who heard his sermon on the mount and he says to us on this first Sunday of the New Year, anxiety about the surface concerns of our life will not add a single hour to the span of your life and it won't enhance the substantive quality of it either.

The Challenge? Let Go!

The challenge to us regarding our penchant to let concerns become worrisome fears and chronic anxieties? Let go! Let go!

This morning, I want to offer you two simple methods by which I am confident we can let our anxieties go and thus be free for more purposeful and enjoyable lives in 2011.

- Resist the temptation to allow the menace of your worries to become monsters. Succumbing to such temptation gives us the excuse of victimhood.
- Resist the option of trying to do something about the things you can't do anything about. Our overblown imaginations can sometimes lead us to

fantasize about heroic actions that are absolutely impossible for us to perform

“The Serenity Prayer” – which was prayed countless times over a 24-hour period in the New Year’s “Alco-thon” gathering in our Centennial Hall this past weekend – has it just right: *“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”* In other words, let go of your anxieties about things you can not control. Rather than worry yourself sick – physically, mentally and spiritually – over those things beyond your control, let go and then think and act on the things you can control.

Jesus’ Solution: Seek God’s Realm in Your Life

Jesus’ solution for our human penchant for mutating concerns into worries is another curious turn in his sermon. In order to conquer our fretting about the little things in life, we are to – are you ready for this?! – consider the bigger picture from God’s perspective. Jesus calls it *“The Kingdom of God.”* *“... strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness and all these things will be added to you.”*⁵ I like the older translations of this verse a bit better than the new more literal, wooden translations: *“Seek ye first the kingdom of God....”*⁶ Seeking after the bigger picture, with our own, very human efforts, is what makes for a good life, keeping us free from the death-like effects of anxiety and panic and our prolific phobias.

This week I urge you to make a commitment and try a little experiment for the next four weeks. Mark one day a week on your new 2011 calendars for “seeking after the kingdom of God.” Mark it clearly, place it where you can see it when that day of the week arrives. And then “seek.” By that, I mean search for, look for, hunt for.

Seeking may mean doing something good for another human being, a neighbor, a member of the congregation, or a stranger.

It may mean seeking after a new faith insight, or reading a new novel, or checking out a new movie or a play in one of Kansas City’s many theaters.

It may mean sharing a meal with someone you’ve been meaning to break bread with for a long time but you simply haven’t taken time to do so. Do so.

It may mean a new involvement in a non-profit organization, getting

involved in making life better for someone else. Remember that Albert Schweitzer was exactly 100% right when he said: *"I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found a way to serve."*

And this we can surely do with eyes and ears and hearts of faith, seeking after the things that God will use, through us, to make the world right.

Conclusion: Believe What God Believes About You!

On this first Sunday of the New Year I offer you my whole-hearted belief that there is nothing we cannot accomplish, nothing we cannot fulfill if we follow the directions Jesus gives about overcoming worry. Jesus proffered to his hearers then and all of us here and now a sure-fire remedy for conquering our anxieties: Trust God. Trust what God provides for you for your daily living. Trust what God knows about your capacities to provide for yourself and others. Trust what God believes about you.

Last Sunday, Rev. Michelle Harris-Gloyer told a wonderful story about her encounter with the legendary Cornel West. The measure of a story's power is its capacity to compel re-telling. Michelle's recounting of her encounter with Dr. West is just such a story.

During the question and answer session that followed a lecture by Dr. West, Michelle remembered hearing him speak about the great affirmations which he experienced growing up. His recollection, in essence, was "My community told me all sorts of good things about me. And I believed them!"⁷

Jesus the Christ, a poor peasant in a backwater province of the Roman empire, a lowly carpenter Nazareth who ended up penniless and crucified, wearing only a tawdry loin cloth in public ignominy in Jerusalem, would conquer death and shame and lovelessness and all personal and social debilitation by hearing God's affirmations about his life and its trustworthiness. Could it be that the power of his preaching the Sermon on the Mount emanated from his memory of the day of his baptism when the skies parted and a voice from beyond proclaimed, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased...."?⁸ Could he also have been remembering what Mary and Joseph said of his abilities and the trustworthiness of his life being in God's hands?

Jesus' life is evidence enough that such trusting works. Let us hear God's affirmations about our lives and how God can be trusted to take care of us. Then, let us believe them! As we do so, watch out world! We and the world will never be the same again!

Again, Happy New Year! I love you. God bless us everyone.

One final reminder. Remember to look at the birds. If you see Seymour, convey my thanks for the lesson he taught me. Amen.

NOTES

- 1 Matthew 6:25.
- 2 Forrest Church, *Freedom from Fear: Finding the Courage to Act, Love, and Be* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), pp. 25-26.
- 3 Ibid., p. 26.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Matthew 6:34.
- 6 King James Version, Matthew 6:34.
- 7 Rev. Michelle Harris-Gloyer, sermon, "*Simeon and Anna: Satisfied Lives*," December 26, 2010, Community Christian Church, Kansas City, Missouri.
- 8 Matthew 3:17.