

February 27, 2010: CALLED AND IMPOVERISHED  
Matthew 6:24-34, 1 Corinthians 4:1-5; Psalm 131  
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Years ago, there was a terrible country-western song, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” When it was performed in Wisconsin bars, the custom was for patrons to join the “Don’t worry, be happy!” chorus by shouting and raising their beers. When I read today’s gospel lesson, that’s what came to mind, so I looked for it on YouTube. I only found Bobby McFerrin’s version, which is actually good music. The video, though, is shallow and simplistic, which reflects the problem with Jesus’ message. It’s good advice, but it sounds so sappy in the face of life’s realities. Jesus’ “Don’t worry,” is a *command*, though, and he doesn’t add, “be happy.” What he adds is a rhetorical question, “Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?”

We’re supposed to answer “yes,” but how are 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans supposed to understand worry, now that we’ve got Zoloff? Jesus says not to worry about wealth, and church people are so conflicted on that subject, what with vows of poverty by one branch of the church and the promise of prosperity for the truly holy, by another branch. Toss in what economists say about our “don’t worry” attitude toward credit, as the cause of our economic crash, and you have a rich stew. Whether Wall Street’s devil-may-care attitude or the average consumer credit card debt of \$30,000 is to blame, there has been a lot of collateral damage from our cultural attitude toward money. Jesus cannot be saying “don’t worry for the sake of worry.” The rich person who doesn’t feel concern for the poor and hungry is “unworried,” as is the self-medicated alcoholic who drowns the ability to worry in a bottle. “Don’t worry” is not about better mental health.

Jesus’ original audience was subsistence-class peasants, for whom long-range strategic plans were unheard-of luxuries. These days, we want to (and believe we can) manage our lives. We worry about controlling variables and planning ahead. Despite what televangelists tell us, the choice presented by faith isn’t that of the prosperity gospel—God rewards your faithfulness with riches, so choose faith. That’s not our choice. Our choice is between counting on wealth (and our ability to manage and control the world) or counting on God. Jesus’ command, “Don’t worry,” invite us to participate in God’s Kingdom, and I’m not speaking of reducing your belongings to 100 items or living in 400 square feet, as some Portland adventurers are doing. Get your priorities clear, Jesus says, line them up with God’s vision for all creation, *then* worry will not be an issue.

What Jesus tells his listeners not to worry about—food, drink, clothing—are the very things he tells his followers in chapter 25 will determine their place on judgment day. “I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was naked and you gave me no clothing.” That’s sobering. In other words, if we obey the command to not worry about food, drink, and clothes, that means our focus is on God and God’s reign, so that we are the answer to the cry of the poor in those matters.

All of which is very challenging. Thank God we have theologians, to help us rationalize what Jesus means by “Don’t worry.” Do not be misled. To “not worry” doesn’t mean “believing *that*” God exists, it is believing that God has intimate, trustworthy care *for us*. Jesus asks a series of rhetorical questions to explain “why not” worry. After asking, “Is not life more than food, the body more than clothing?” he asks in essence, “Is God aware of your needs?” and “Can you trust God to care for you?” The answers are supposed to be “yes,” with the implication, “Then work for God’s Kingdom and its righteousness.”

How a person hears these questions will depend on where they are in life. We nice Pacific Northwest Presbyterians will hear this differently than the South Sudanese trying to establish a fledgling democracy after generations of civil war and starvation. If the line you are

standing in is to receive the chlorination tablets that will make the water clean enough that your children will not die of cholera, what you hear will be different than if you are in line at Starbucks wondering whether to buy a \$2 bottle of flavored water with “no sugar, no calories.” If you at the Eastminster warming shelter, digging through donated clothes with Amie to find a jacket you can wear to school over your T-shirt, how you hear that “don’t worry” will be different from the 6<sup>th</sup> grade boys in my neighborhood who were too cool to wear jackets on Thursday in the snow.

Jesus speaks of a new kind of reality, one that is less about judging others, more about knowing your motives and issues when you hear his question, “Is not life more than food and clothing?” How do we live with the knowledge of too few who have too much, and the too many who have too little? The one may experience lives impoverished of meaning, while the other may be too impoverished to pursue the luxury of meaning. The new reality Jesus points to requires a fundamental choice between our work for personal economic security and our trust in God. Wealth isn’t bad, but how well or poorly we deal with it will be the basis of the judgment the apostle Paul assures us we will all face.

I have a couple of friends who were high-flyers during the boom years of the 1980s, the era that gave us the song, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” They had a prosperous business, hung out at the finest clubs, mixed it up with the town’s movers and shakers, had the means to be philanthropic. They weren’t in the same league as Bill and Melinda Gates, but they had enough that they were intentional about giving and had developed a philosophy of giving with good, theological grounding. They demonstrated interest in at-risk teens and homeless people, urged their church’s involvement in their causes, developed partnerships with racial justice organizations, immigrant mentoring programs, international missions, alternative education programs, and addiction resources. The list of their worthy efforts with both their time and money was impressive and contagious.

And then the economic bottom fell out. They lost everything and were indentured to the bank, in order to protect their investors from economic fallout. They had trusted the smoke and mirror guys for sophisticated investment portfolios, trusting the *self*-confidence of their all-star strategic planners. Their generous charitable gifts shriveled overnight, their interest payments became a line of profit for the bank, the well-connected friends dropped them. Twenty years later, these generous people assure me it was the best thing that ever happened to them, losing that fortune. It didn’t change who they are and what they did. Sure, it was on a different scale, but they learned to embody the answer to Jesus’ question, “Is not life more than how you toil or what you spin?”

Both Paul and Jesus preach accountability to God. Friends, that type of accountability sets us up to a higher standard of judgment. If we rely on ourselves, we’re smart to be worried. To rely on God gives us so much more freedom. Freedom from unnecessary anxiety means we can redirect energy to what is meaningful. Jesus says we *should* feel discomfort about the malnourished children, but he doesn’t say we should be judgmental about whether they or their leaders deserve it. Maybe the question should be, “How did this wealth accumulate, and is anyone hungry because of it?” Seek ye first . . .

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