

**No Worries**  
**A Sermon by Louise Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
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**Text: Matthew 6:24-34**

An outstanding institution of higher education that is not Ohio State once offered a different take on the problem of persistent anxiety by inviting its alums to identify the things about which they did *not* worry. The responses were wide-ranging—from the personal: “I do not worry about what other people think of me...any more,” to the political: “I don’t worry about global warming,” to this zen-like perspective: “I don’t worry about anything over which I have no control.” One writer cheerfully noted that he never worried about the size of the university’s endowment, because “it’s enormous.” My favorite was the one-liner “I never worry that the world will become uninteresting” – even though I know its endless fascinations can create manifold problems as well. More than one respondent sent a quote attributed to Albert Einstein: *Do not worry about your difficulties in math; I assure you mine are still greater.* Hey, even rocket scientists haven’t solved every dilemma that confounds them. In fact, the tone of the entire article seemed ironic, as if in rueful acknowledgement that it’s easier to name what doesn’t worry us, than what does.

We live in an age of such deeply-embedded anxiety, it’s even been given a name: VUCA, an acronym helpfully identifying some sources for our worry: the Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity of life in 2008. At the same time, we’re hungrily seeking relief from that worry; a Google search of the phrase that is this sermon’s title revealed over one million, three hundred thousand entries. We know all too well the direct correlation about worry and disease: hypertension, stress disorders, ulcers and digestive troubles, insomnia. And I will admit to you that much of this sermon was written with the reggae-beat of Bobby McFerrin bouncing around in my head: *Don’t worry. . . be happy!*

What worries you? Even as I ask that, I become sharply aware of my own answers to that question. Fact is, worry is part of the human condition, the cost of living self-consciously and with a great deal of freedom. Our worries begin at the moment of birth as we are severed from our pre-natal life source and find ourselves on a journey through a world, with a body that will literally kill us, sooner or later. In the meantime, we worry about belonging, finding purpose, making connections, and achieving significance and even transcendence. Oh yeah, we worry: about terrorism and war, about hungry children and decaying cities, about environmental threats. We worry about the Indians. We worry about our children, and our parents. We worry about our health. We worry about getting old....er. We worry about money. We worry about death, and about what will happen to us after that. Perhaps even more acutely we worry about how to live the best life we possibly can until death takes us away.

So what allays your fears? The gospel reading that is our text this morning is part of the collection of Jesus' well-known sayings known as "the sermon on the mount." And there it is, in plain English: Do not worry. I suppose this text is cited often by preachers as a rebuke. Thou shalt not....be anxious. Thou shalt not!!!!!! If we stop there, then all we can expect is a good scolding for our worry. But one thing that's true about Jesus: the pinpoint accuracy of his description of the human condition is never his last word. There is prescription here as well, and it's worth a second look. Listen for God's Word to you in the reading from the gospel according to Matthew, in the sixth chapter at the 24<sup>th</sup> verse.

[MATTHEW 6:24-34]

The sermon germination group that explored this text with me did not hold back after we read it aloud. "Well, that's just about the most impractical advice I can imagine!" one person said, adding, "You can't just 'not worry'—life takes planning, hard work, and personal responsibility. Jesus even seems to consider these characteristics contrary to faith. Surely he

doesn't mean we should just let go of all that and think that God is going to provide!" Her comments made sense. I kept thinking about the Aesop's fable of the ant and the grasshopper. The ant spent her days storing up food for the long winter ahead, while the grasshopper just flitted from plant to plant, eating his fill, lah di da. When winter came, he had no reserves, and was caught in a terrible jam. The message was clear, and echoes the most well-known Bible verse that isn't actually in the Bible: God helps those who help themselves.

Yet it's easy to see how worry diminishes the value of the present moment because it's always referencing a future moment. Jesus acknowledges that tomorrow will have its challenges, and they will need our attention. But primary focus on those imagined situations robs us of today's real ones, with their troubles, yes, but also their particular miracle and meaning. Today is the only day we have been given to marvel at the lilies of the field, slap high fives with a four-year-old, show kindness to a stranger in need, say "I love you." This is the day. Don't let worry about tomorrow dull its exquisite beauty.

Another person questioned the parallel between God's provisions for birds and flowers with God's care for humanity. He recalled a photo he had seen of women in Haiti making "dry mud cookies"---a mixture of salt, mud, and vegetable shortening, the only resources they had---to quiet the protests of their children's empty stomachs, even though they lacked much nutritional benefit. God does provide, he agreed, but humans have choices, some of which have resulted in unjust distribution of the world's bounty between the "haves" and "have-nots." This text might sound pretty hollow to those desperate, albeit hard-working Haitian mothers.

No worries??? How can we not?????!----without seeming cold and indifferent, or at the very least irresponsible and naïve?

The text's opening verses suggest a context for Jesus' words that seem so unrealistic, and even unconcerned. They point to a central loyalty from which all other loyalties are derived. Who or what is your master? Who or what is the controlling force in your life? This is the first question that must be settled in order to figure out how to live joyfully and peacefully even when confronted with the unexpected, the things we didn't plan for, the realities over which we have little or no control. Jesus says explicitly that this question must be answered unambiguously, but that once you get that right, everything else will find a place.

Worry becomes destructive when it is focused on the self, and strives for control. It will only grow and take over a greater part of our lives because the notion that we can control life is largely an illusion. We spiral downward into ever-smaller circles of concern: because that's about all we can manage! My career; my family; my piece of the pie; my life. Fear grows; worries increase. It's like this glass of water. It's really not that heavy. I can manage it easily for minutes, and even enjoy its cool refreshment. But if I held this small burden for an hour, my arm would ache. If I held it –no more, no less—for a day, you'd have to call an ambulance. I cannot finally control my life forever. The uncertainty, the stress, my own mortality make it impossible.

The contrasting perspective Jesus offers is an invitation to make God the center; to acknowledge that God rules over the creation and desires only health and wholeness for all its inhabitants. When we place our lives in service to God, our orientation shifts away from a singular devotion to self, towards a broader one in which the needs of others are considered as well. We plan and work and yes, even worry sometimes, but at the heart of it we trust in a God who is there, a God who is unequivocally “for” us and for all people, a God of grace who provides abundantly. A God who invites us to lay our burdens down, to give them to God and learn how good it feels to be free.

Does embracing such an attitude mean we will work less or stop preparing for the future? Two examples provided by sermon group members suggest otherwise. One of them told about his grandmother who migrated with her family from Georgia to Ohio in the 1920s. Leaving home for the economic promise of the North was an act of faith; like so many others, she encountered prejudice and suspicion and even hostility in her new community. She worked very hard to feed, clothe, and educate her family, and the extent to which she did so is reflected in their college degrees and successful careers. Yet what her grandson remembers most of her teachings was her repeated affirmation, "God will provide. God will provide." To her, it was God's presence and God's care that hallowed her human effort and made a lasting impact.

A young person in the sermon discussion group is a wrestler, and like any athlete, worries about doing his best in competition. He is self-disciplined, gives his all during practices, and works hard to be at the top of his game. Yet he found himself almost unbearably anxious before meets, afraid of failing and letting down others. Now he keeps a photograph in his locker where he will see it almost daily---a picture of another Ohio wrestler, a state qualifier with an impressive 41-3 win/loss record; a young man who as it happens has no arms or legs. Seeing his life contrasted with that student's has helped him appreciate the gifts he possesses and no longer takes for granted, inspired his wrestling, and reduced his worry.

Neither the grandmother nor the young athlete relinquished personal responsibility, but both came to see those efforts in a broader context of a world in which God is present and caring. In different ways, each grew in ability to entrust themselves to that God, and to God's way of love and justice.

And that, finally, is the surest way to eliminate harmful worry from our lives. Trust. Worry is fundamentally a spiritual malaise, and the most effective antidote is also spiritual in nature. But the best way that spiritual antidote is administered

is through a surprisingly imperfect medium known as the church, the community of faith, the body of Christ. Here, among people with troubles and terrors and sleepless nights, God's love is revealed. It's so ironic: God knows the needs of each one of us. We only know our own, until we tell them to each other. Lo and behold, we discover that "need" is something common to us all. In different ways, at different times, to different degrees. But as we come to trust one another with those needs, we discover in powerful ways how trustworthy God's love is. And how transforming! I can't tell you how many church members over the years have exclaimed to me that the caring they experienced from their church in a time of trouble made the difference. Yet some of us hesitate to share, and some of us hesitate to ask, because we're afraid: of what? Seeming weak? Or unsuccessful? Or needy? Friends, that's us; all of us, sometimes. Try this: at coffee hour today, speak with one person about something that concerns you, a worry you're holding today. It might be something you're facing personally, or a problem troubling you from today's news headlines. Dare to trust yourself to that person, even a little. I truly believe as we do so, we will experience God's blessing in the form of a burden lifted, a friendship deepened, and maybe even a new perspective to consider.

No worries? Well, fewer worries. We don't know what the future may hold for any of us, but by faith we know Who holds that future. "Come to me," Jesus invites, "all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest."

**NOW TO THE RULER OF ALL WORLDS, UNDYING, INVISIBLE,  
THE ONLY GOD, BE HONOR AND GLORY FOREVER AND  
EVER!**

**The Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor**