

“WHEN WE SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF”

Pastor Becky Stephens

Text: Matthew 6:25-33

Said the robin to the sparrow, “I really do not know why it is these human beings rush about and worry so.” Said the sparrow to the robin, “I think it must be that they have no Heavenly Father, such as cares for you and me.”

This is really quite a sad little monologue, because it cuts right to the heart of why so many of us waste so much time worrying and getting stressed out. It cuts right to the heart of our faith!

Do we really have a Heavenly Father who cares for us?

God came to this earth in the form of a human being to answer this question once and for all. He died the death we deserve to answer this question once and for all. He offers us the faith that will allow us to enter His Kingdom...even while we are still living on this earth because He loves and cares for us more than any of us can ever fathom! And He even told us that we are much more important to Him than “the birds of the air” that do not sow nor reap nor store things away...but are well taken care of just the same. What a reason to be thankful! And yet, although most of us sitting here today may profess to believe this, we still spend way too much time worrying.

I will share with you that this text has brought me great comfort. In 2016, when Olivia was in the midst of having 2 major surgeries—one in March that was 8 hours long and another in November that was over 11 hours long—I found myself in the midst of worry. My jaws were tight, my shoulders had knots, and my stomach was constantly upset. When we headed to the hospital, I was so overwhelmed with worry that my leg was going 90 miles a minute and I could hardly keep my hands calm.

Then a little sparrow landed on the ground near where my car was parked. I looked at that sparrow and that little sparrow looked back at me. Something quite amazing happened. I thought back on this passage of Scripture that we are looking at today, and a peace which transcends all understanding came over me as I thought out loud: “Well, little sparrow, if God loves you enough to take care of you, then I know He loves my daughter so much more and He will take care of her.”

That was a miracle. It was also a witness to how the Christian believer can overcome one of the greatest enemies of humankind, which is worry and stress. Yes, worry and stress is one of life's deepest personal problems, and right here in the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus confronts this problem head on! And He has an answer for this problem...THE answer!

To many this Scripture passage seems unbelievable. We may love to hear these beautiful words—whether they are read, set to music or sung—but how often do we really ask what they mean?

Many people, if they do investigate the meaning, may take one startled look, and then run away! It's beautiful, they think, but oh, how impractical! "Do not worry? Impossible!" Yet if we can get beneath the surface and penetrate the depths of this message, we may find it to be one of the most freeing and practical messages in the Bible.

What do you worry about most? Is it your job? Is it how you look? Is it whether or not people will like you? No matter what it is that we worry about most, the chances are that we have found all kinds of ways to try and deal with and cover up this stress.

Some of us turn to drugs and alcohol. Some of us waste considerable amounts of money on the latest fashions, cars, and weight loss programs. Some of us just try and decide that we aren't going to worry about anything or anybody. Saying and thinking things like: "I don't care. Just drop it. Just give up," is one of this generation's favorite modes of escape.

But this stuff is just all padding and fluff to protect ourselves from worry and stress. And if we really take Jesus' words in this passage to heart, well, this message will rip our futile coverings right off! And then, if we, by the grace of God, do respond to the depths of this message we will be healed and our old protections won't be necessary any longer.

William Arthur Ward observed: "Worry distorts our thinking, disrupts our work, disquiets our soul, disturbs our body, and disfigures our face. It destroys our friends, demoralizes our life, defeats our faith, and debilitates our energy." I'd say that's a pretty good working definition, wouldn't you?

So Jesus tells us not to worry. Jesus knows that the Christian life is about an intimate relationship—a friendship between God and humankind. But we often leave God out of the equation. We try and count on our own achievements. But in declaring our independence from God we run into some real problems.

We seek pleasure and find nausea. We seek safety, and find that we are cowardly and defenseless. We seek riches, and we find ourselves willing to kill each other in order to gain them and hoard them.

Jesus tells us: “seek first” God’s “kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Jesus really knew something about life, didn’t he? He came up against disappointments. He told parables about injustices. He yearned to escape a cruel death, but prayed “may your will be done.”

And Jesus’ words have been written down for us by His disciples who knew the hard side of life. They must have seen something in His promises that many of us fail to see. There are many self-help books and gurus out there today, but let’s face it; our proud modern answers aren’t always so good. Anxiety continues to shake us to our depths! We still haven’t solved our problems.

With everything that modern nutrition and medication can do there comes a time for all of us when no one can add an inch to their stature or a day to their life span. “Who of you can add a single hour to his life?”

To a preacher or any Christian who is worried about the consequences of witnessing to the Gospel without diluting its power, Jesus would undoubtedly say: “Keep running the race. Keep speaking the truth in love. If you lose your job, that loss is no loss. If you are concerned first and last about fulfilling God’s purpose, and if you will work faithfully, God will provide for you. Whether you live or die, you are in His kind and all-competent hands.”

Martin Luther understood Jesus Christ’s answer to stress. Once he was challenged by a Cardinal who threatened him with all the powers of the Pope, whose little finger was stronger than all of Germany. “Where then,” thundered the Cardinal, “will a wretched worm like you be?” “Then as now,” answered Luther, “in the hands of Almighty God.” With this kind of faith, our troubles can be met and mastered.

Now, we must keep in mind that when Jesus says to us: “Therefore I tell you do not worry...” there are several things that He does NOT mean. He’s not just patting us on our backs and saying, “Don’t worry. Everything will work out just fine.” Jesus knows things don’t always work out just fine. He’s not saying that God will just step in and take care of all our mistakes and oversights. Sometimes He tells us plainly that there is a place to plan ahead.

Look at Luke 14:28-30.

And Jesus isn’t saying that those of us who trust in Him will never be injured or persecuted. He has already told Christian believers to expect, and rejoice in, persecution. And Jesus isn’t saying that we should ignore food. He has told us to pray: “give us this day our daily bread,” and He has never criticized honest work. He isn’t saying that the lilies of the field will just live happily ever after. As he spoke these words He was probably thinking of Isaiah 40:8 which says: “the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of our God stands forever.”

What Jesus does tell us is that our destinies are controlled by the God who stands forever. That we, who neither determine our births or our deaths, are helpless; but if we trust God, we are tying our finiteness to the One and Only Eternal God of power and purpose.

If our goal in life is to keep our hearts beating and our stomachs full, we will all eventually fail. But if we seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness, we will be given everything else we need—we won't be immune to hunger and pain and death, but we can have confidence in spite of them!

A modern psychologist says that the clinical practice of psychologists today show that the chief problem of people is emptiness. By emptiness he means lack of purpose, lack of power, lack of direction. He says that he finds more anxiety today than in any period in history. Do we see how the Gospel of Jesus Christ answers this problem?

When we are detached from God, trying to be self-sufficient, everything threatens our existence. We are finite. We are mortal. Nuclear war or some invisible virus could just wipe us out. In our nakedness and danger we have nothing to hold onto. But Jesus says to us: Trust your Father.

Your life gets its power, its vitality, its meaning from Him and Him alone! We are all approaching pain and death. Countless people have gone into this before us. Empty people have been overwhelmed by anxiety; trusting Christians have been confident.

Jesus tells us that our prayers will be answered. But what will God give us? Not just any old thing we might happen to want. The answer is the theme of the entire Sermon on the Mount. God gives us His Kingdom.

When Jesus prayed at Gethsemane, He was given, not an escape from the pain ahead, but the power of God "strengthening him."

When Paul prayed for release from his "thorn in the flesh," he got the divine answer, "My grace is sufficient for you." No wonder Paul could write to the Philippians that the answer to their anxiety was "the peace of God which transcends all understanding." And that is the only peace that can satisfy our souls.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism wrote: "Before you entertain any other thought or worry, let it be your concern that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ rules in your heart...Let God have complete dominion over you. Permit Him to reign without a rival. Allow Him to possess all your heart, and rule alone. Let him be your one desire, your joy, and your love. Then you can continually cry out, 'For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.'"

May it be so with us.