

## **It's Either One or the Other**

### **Matthew 6:25-34**

One man said to another, "I have a ton of credit card debt, I lost my job, my car is being repossessed, and my house is in foreclosure, but I'm not worried."

"How can you not be worried?" his friend asked.

"I've hired a professional worrier. He does all my worrying for me. That way I don't have to think about it."

"Wow!" his friend exclaimed. "How much does this service cost you?"

"\$50,000 a year," replied the first man.

"Given all your problems, where in the world are you going to get that kind of money?" his friend asked incredulously.

"I don't know," came the reply. "That's his worry."

Humor aside, worry is a serious problem for us. Worry can consume us. We fret, stew, constantly complain, and wring our hands. Worry manifests itself in stress, and stress is what lowers our immune system, leading to depression, ulcers, and heart problems.

We tend to worry and stress out over small things. We get irritated, even angry, at the slightest provocation. When we worry about little things, we turn them into big things, and our well-being, as well as the well-being of those around us, suffers.

The solution to over-reacting to a situation and making more out of it than is necessary is a two-step process. First, it is my contention that whenever something adverse happens to us we need to stop for a moment and ask, "Is this an inconvenience or a problem?" There really isn't a third option. Inconvenience or problem – it's either one or the other.

Most irritants, if we are honest, will fall into being inconveniences. Unfortunately, we usually treat them as problems and over-react accordingly. When we do that, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. We turn our inconveniences into problems. And then we worry and stress out.

The difference between inconveniences and problems is significant. An inconvenience is a momentary annoyance. A problem is serious, possibly distressing, and if not dealt with will hang around, becoming worse. An inconvenience is not destructive. A problem might be. We can let go of most inconveniences. And if an inconvenience must be addressed, then we can almost always do so without expending a great deal of energy. An inconvenience can and should be met with a moderate tone and a measured response. A problem, however, almost always requires a response, and frequently such will demand energy, commitment, and perhaps resources. The challenge with a problem is to respond to it without letting it consume us to the point that we become impotent.

When we face an intervening force in our lives, we must first decide whether it is an inconvenience or a problem. And if we honestly assess it as a problem, then we have two choices – we can either worry about it, or we can be concerned about it. Worry is being out of control. Concern is being in control. Worry leads to paralysis; concern leads to resolution.

All of this is a practical approach to negative factors that enter our lives. Jesus offers practical advice also, but it is wrapped in the Divine. Our Lord's words in this passage constitute a commandment that we are to take seriously. Jesus is not forbidding a prudent, active response to our concerns and problems; he is forbidding a worried fear that sucks all the joy out of life. In verse 27, Jesus says that worry is useless, not adding one hour to our lives. To the contrary, the opposite is true. Worry can subtract years from our lives. Worry is like a hamster on a wheel – lots of energy expended and nothing to show for it except exhaustion.

Jesus is telling us to slow down, take a deep breath, and look at the birds, grass, and flowers. I believe he means this literally. He wants us, in the heat of an adverse moment, to stop, take a good look at God's creation all around us, and to remind ourselves of the provisions God gives to us. God cares for all his creatures, from the smallest to the largest. Jesus reminds us that we are also God's creatures. Just because God separated us from all other species by giving us an intellect doesn't mean he wants us to decide to go it alone. We cannot, and when we try, Jesus says, "O you of little faith."

When worry does rear its ugly head, Jesus tells us to do two things. First and foremost, he says we are to focus on the kingdom of God and accept God's will. Worry is actually a preoccupation that keeps our eyes off the King and the kingdom. Worry brings confusion, not freedom. We are to keep God in the forefront of our thoughts through thick and thin, the good times and bad.

I like theologian William Barclay's analogy. He said, "We know in our lives a great love can drive out every concern. Such a love can inspire one's work, intensify one's study, purify one's life, dominate one's whole being. It was Jesus' conviction that worry is banished when God becomes the dominating power in our lives."

Second, Jesus tells us to take one day at a time. We logically counter with our need to plan for the future, and so on. Jesus understands. He is presenting to us an attitude that ought to be our mantra. He says it doesn't do any good to worry about yesterday; it's done and gone. He also says it really doesn't do any good to worry about tomorrow. Such does not preclude our judicious planning for the future. It does prohibit our worrying about tomorrow, when that worry may well be unfounded, and when we should be trusting in God's activity in our life.

Something intrudes into our life, perhaps even momentarily overwhelms us. Is it an inconvenience or a problem? It's either one or the other. If an inconvenience, we can easily deal with it, or even ignore it. If it's a problem, we can then decide whether it is a concern or a worry. If it's a concern, then we approach it with the same attitude that Jesus gave us to defeat worry. We employ our best devices and strategies, and seek God's kingdom as we work to overcome the concern. If, on the other hand, the problem creates real worry, meaning there is no solution within our control, then we turn that worry over to God and seek whatever avenues we can for resolution. Most all worries can, with God's help, be reduced to resolvable concerns. And where they cannot, then we continue to hold onto and trust our faith, striving for God and his righteousness. When we do, worry truly dissipates and we are at peace.

Remember that man who paid a professional to do his worrying for him? In truth, we have one, only we don't have to pay him. His name is Jesus and he is as close as your own heart. Deposit your worries with him and live life to the fullest. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 6 February 2011