

# Jesus' Great Questions: Which of You by Worrying. . .

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February 21, 2016 The Second Sunday of Lent

## **Matthew 6:24-34**

Which of you by worrying - can any of you by worrying – add a single hour to your span of life? Talk about things I wish Jesus had never said – questions he had never asked! It feels like he is picking on me? Who am I if I am not worrying? Worrying is one of the things I do best. Around our house, Betty has started asking me... what are you going to worry about after you retire? I assure her I will find something. So for someone like me, it is unsure if these words of Jesus are comforting or extremely challenging.

Reflecting on this text, New Testament scholar, Tom Long, writes, “When Jesus says to look at the birds and consider the lilies of the fields, he is using strong verbs. They mean to suggest more than a casual glance. Jesus commands us to look, really look at a world where God provides freely and lavishly, a world where anxiety plays no part, where worry is not a reality. Jesus invites us to allow our imaginations to enter such a world, to compare this world with the world in which we must live our lives. The rent is still due, of course, and the department store still expects payment for jeans and coats, but we have seen this other world, this world of God’s gracious and tender care, and it promises to overthrow the power of anxiety.”

Imagine that... living in a world where we can overthrow the power of anxiety. Where do I go to sign up? Last October I took a few days off and worked on sermon ideas and topics for the year. So I picked this Lenten Theme – Jesus’ Great Questions – and today’s question and text from Matthew several months ago. Little did I know that I would be talking about the lilies of the field and letting go of anxiety just after the stock market decided to enter a time of extreme volatility, with far more low lows than high highs. What fun it has been, as I make plans to retire, to watch the value of my pension declining day after day since the first of the year. What, me worry? After all, I am overthrowing the power of anxiety. Yeah - right.

And yet, perhaps we first should ask if anxiety is really such a bad thing. The late Peter Gomes, longtime minister of the Memorial Church on the campus of Harvard, once preached on this text at an exclusive girl’s school in Manhattan. He thought that Jesus’ words about not worrying would help calm the anxious overachievers who often populate such academies. And the sermon seemed to go well... with one exception. In Gomes’ words, “At the reception following the service, the father of one of the girls came up to me with fire in his eyes and ice in his voice, and told me that what I had said was a lot of nonsense. I replied that I hadn’t said it, that Jesus had. ‘It’s still nonsense,’ he said, not easily dissuaded by my appeal to scripture. He continued, ‘It was anxiety that got my daughter into this school; it was anxiety that kept her here; it was anxiety that got her into Yale; it will be anxiety that will keep her there, and it will be anxiety that will get her a good job. You are selling nonsense!’”

He had a point. The notion that one ought to glide through life, thoughtless for tomorrow, is certainly no way to cope in the complex, fast moving and ever changing society we live in today. Sure birds and lilies, lovely as they are, don’t worry about life, but they also don’t have mortgages, car payments, grocery bills, college loans, grades, SATs, work deadlines and challenging relationships to keep them up at night. It can be tempting, much like that father, to see Jesus’ words as a lovely but sentimental, even dangerous, impracticality. Or are they?

Another story, this one told by one of my favorite preachers, the late Fred Craddock. I still can’t quite believe he is no longer with us. “Up in the Georgia hills, in the county where I was serving a church, ministers in the area would take turns being chaplain for a week at the local hospital. One week when I was on call, a baby was born. There weren’t a lot of births in that little hospital. I got to the hospital about nine in the morning and I saw all these people gathered around, looking through the glass at that little baby. ‘Is it a boy or girl?’ I asked. ‘It’s a girl!’

“ ‘What’s her name?’

“ ‘Elizabeth’.

“ ‘Is her father here?’

Leaning against the wall was a young man. ‘I’m the father,’ he said.

“ ‘Beautiful baby,’ I said. She was squirming and screaming. You couldn’t hear here through the glass, but she was screaming, red-faced and all that. I thought the new father might be concerned. I said, ‘She’s not sick or anything. It’s good for babies to scream like that. It clears out their lungs and gets their voices going. She’s all right.’

“He said, ‘I know she’s not sick. But she’s mad as hell. Oh, pardon me Reverend.’

“ ‘Oh that’s all right. But why do you think she’s so mad?’

“He answered, ‘Well, wouldn’t you be mad? One minute you’re with God in heaven and the next minute you’re in Georgia.’

“I said, ‘You believe she was with God before she came here?’

“ ‘Oh yeah.’

“ ‘Do you think she will remember?’

“He answered, ‘Well, that’s up to her mother and me. It’s up to the church. We’ve got to see that she remembers, ‘cause if she forgets, she’s a goner.’”

Who knew such a theologian/philosopher would be found in the hill country of Georgia? I don’t know if that baby’s father had ever read or heard of Howard Thurman, that great saint of the church, but his words remind me of something Thurman once said: “It is a strange freedom to be adrift in the world of humanity without a sense of anchor anywhere. Always there is a need for mooring, the need for the firm grip of something that is rooted and will not give.” “We’ve got to see that she remembers.” You know what, we all need to remember.

And so Jesus tells us, “Strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and these things will be given you as well.” He isn’t talking about irresponsibility, about not caring. But he is reminding us to pay attention to what it is that ultimately anchors our lives. Look – consider – pay attention... because if we don’t, we can easily forget and end up making decisions and living lives that simply reflect the assumptions and anxieties of the world around us – we forget God’s many blessings, such as two healthy and happy grandsons and instead lie awake at night worrying about pension income. Slowly and subtly we get distracted from that which matters most.

I suppose the question becomes, what do I – we – really gain by hanging onto anxiety? What is so valuable about panicking? What do we have to lose if, like the lilies of the field, we let go of anxiety and fear and instead move toward a deeper sense of composure based on trust in the providence and blessings of God? Now yes, as I have already said more than once today, bills must be paid and responsibilities fulfilled. Simply to say, “Don’t worry,” doesn’t really help when we are struggling with all the many twists and turns of daily life, and certainly staring at lilies and birds is not going to get next week’s sermon written or help much with that pile of laundry which stubbornly refuses to wash itself or with meeting that deadline at work.

But below all that, in the depths of our lives, Jesus wants us to know that there is something – someone – that is stronger, more abiding, more trustworthy than our restless anxiety. He wants us to know that nothing in the present and nothing in the future can destroy our basic worth as human beings created in God’s image, and that, whatever tomorrow brings, it will also bring God and God’s anchoring love and care with it. Perhaps it is only as we begin to relax and let go of our control and anxieties that we can begin to see all God is doing and all that God is providing each day. Says Tom Long, echoing words with which I began, “Jesus wants us not merely to glance at, mull over or look quickly, but to look... really look. If we look long enough and hard enough at the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, suddenly there will break into our imagination a slice of that alternative reality, that kingdom of God, a world not of tooth and claw, but a world of providential care, a world in which the One who created it delights in tending the garden and nourishing the creature. What if we choose to live in that world - a world of divine abundance, a world where ‘your heavenly father knows that you need all these things’; a world not ruled by acquisitiveness and insecurity, but a world in which God gives gift after gift?

Overthrowing anxiety – still a huge challenge for me. I’m anxious and worried about so much. I even worry about not being worried! But perhaps it begins with daring to trust – to trust that I am not in this alone; that God is here, that you are here and in loving community there is hope and love and power. We truly can have fullness and meaning in life instead of worry and wanting. And when we begin to clothe ourselves, not in the clothes of this world, not in the worries of daily life, but in the beauty of God love and righteousness, we just might begin to recognize that large areas of our lives are pure gift, that there is a joy beyond anxiety and that, in the words of an ancient church father, all manner of things shall be well.