

Denice Leslie
May 25, 2008
2nd after Pentecost
Matthew 6: 24 – 34

“Christian Optimism”

What, Me Worry?



Jesus says to us today, “Can worry add a single hour to your span of life?”

We aren’t so sure we believe Jesus. Reality seems to say otherwise: “A man was seen fleeing down the hall of a hospital just before his operation. A security guard stopped him before he could leave the hospital and asked, “What’s the matter?”

The man said, “I heard the nurse say, ‘It’s a very simple operation, don’t worry, I’m sure it will be all right.’ “

“She was just trying to comfort you,” said the guard. “What’s so frightening about that?”

The patient said, “She wasn’t talking to me—she was talking to the doctor.”¹ Clearly, there are times when we have good reason to be worried.

However, unnecessary worry can certainly lead to pessimism and cloud future success. Here’s one more:

“George’s first job as a landscape contractor was to remove a large oak stump from a farmer’s field. He was using dynamite for the first time. With the farmer watching, George tried

to hide his nervousness by carefully calculating the size of the stump, the proper amount of dynamite, and where to place it.

“Finally, he and the farmer moved to the detonator behind his pickup truck. With a silent prayer, George plunged the detonator. The stump gracefully rose through the air and then crashed on the cab of the truck. George gazed in despair at the ruined cab, but the farmer was all admiration.

“Son, with a little more practice, those stumps will land in the bed of the truck every time!”

When we face adversity, do we look at the crushed cab and give in to despair, depression and discouragement? Or do we see how close to the bed we came and express joy and optimism?²

Farmers are inherent optimists. They have to be. No one works as hard as a farmer. A farmer places hope in the outcome of a harvest which is not yet knowing from hard experience the many probabilities for calamity and yet goes out every day and works as if the harvest is a sure thing and if not this year then next year. As Hebrews tells us, Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (11.1) Daily farmers live out this reality with the full clear-eyed knowledge of the risks.

Jesus speaks to us about trusting in God to provide for our needs. At first glance his words seem to be Pollyanna advice given the realities of life for many people where hunger, poverty, disaster and oppressive governments rule.

However, Jesus, like a farmer, is fully aware of these realities in life and calls us to be equally aware. That’s why he couples his admonition against worry with his words about our inability to serve two masters: God and mammon. He knows the quandary we are in.

² --Tim Riter, *Deep Down* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1995), 51.

¹ Homiletics, May 2008 p. 31

Basically Jesus is challenging us to farm optimism in a world of insecurity—in a world that grows pessimism.

But in order to do this, Jesus tells us we cannot serve both God and mammon.

Mammon is an Aramaic word for wealth and material possessions. It did not carry the negative connotation it does in our contemporary minds that wealth is somehow inherently evil.

{Jesus words to us are deeper and wiser than our assumptions and the narrow sphere to which we are apt, without his guidance, to apply them. We as his disciples are called to hear how we can not only make our way in this world unencumbered by needless worry over our own security but also how we can live with steely opened eyed optimism in the face of the world’s realities and make a difference.}

Here is some historical economic context:

In the villages of Galilee no one was well off but neither were most folks destitute. One of my favorite bible commentators says that Jesus and his band of disciples could expect to show up on a doorstep in a Galilean village and be fed. The economic situation was viable enough to eke out survival—especially when lived out in caring community.

It is in this time and place, and within this context Jesus says worry is useless and purposely draws his contrasts of opposites: God and Mammon.

In so doing Jesus draws our attention away from the distraction of material fixation to the freeing reality of God’s providence at work in the world.



Our economic situation today is very similar—we are not starving. We have enough to share and if we cooperate with one another in caring community we know we can all survive. In other words, our worry over these things is selfish and an unnecessary distraction from doing God’s will.

What God’s will is depends on what our perspective is of God. William Loader puts it this way,

“If your image of God is of one who will guarantee you blessing, here or beyond, so that you can do better than others, then your God is in close alliance with mammon. They are mates [brothers]. [Because] There is no difference in the role they play in your life.

So we have a choice. The choice is to choose the God of compassion who calls for sharing or we choose the god of greed and self-indulgence, making ourselves rich and happy at others’ expense. Both can be very religious.”³

Jesus teaches us that in loving our neighbor as ourselves “Love does not mean denial of our basic needs but that it is possible to live in ways that my needs do not have to be met always at your expense. Love and care can flow equally to us all.”⁴

Here is the crux of what I think most of us worry about as Christians: not that we are necessarily captive to mammon and inconsiderate dolts about the needs of our neighbors—we definitely have our times of asking God to bless us in ways that if the logical consequences of our prayer petitions were brought to our attention would cause us to squirm a feel a moment of defeat in our efforts to be faithful.

It’s more that we feel captive in the midst of a culture in which we believe we are unable to distribute what we have in some helpful way that doesn’t squander what we have because the root causes of our neighbor’s need are still in place.

³ William Loader, Murdock University, Australia, First Thoughts on the Lectionary Readings.”

⁴ Ibid.

We feel we are without resource to make any kind of lasting impact or systemic change. And so we live either in denial or when our consciences are pricked we are frustrated and under the uncomfortable shadow of guilt.

It is like we live in a luxury hotel but all the doors to the outside world are locked and we can't get out there and let any one else in and if we could, to be honest, we'd be afraid of being overrun.

And so we live in a kind of apathetic resignation accompanied by a sense of personal insecurity because, if we admit it, we fear those in need.

What's the answer? It's not a simple one. But it is most definitely a freeing and possible one with God! Sometimes a story speaks volumes:



Two scientists were on a field trip in the mountains. They discovered a baby eagle in a nest on a jutting rock, just below the top of a dangerous cliff. The eaglet had been deserted, and they wanted to rescue it. They asked the young son of their guide if they could lower him on a rope to fetch the little bird.

The boy was not at all enthusiastic about their plan, so he declined. They offered him money, and then doubled it, but still the boy refused.

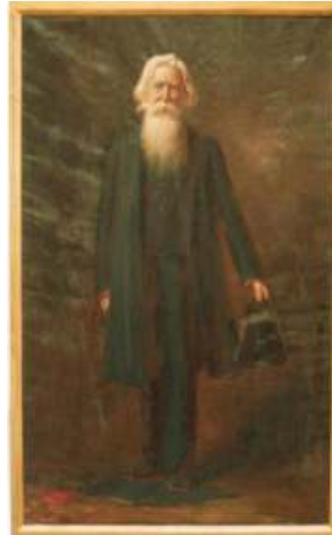
Finally, one of the scientists asked in despair: "Well, then, how do you propose that we save the baby eagle?"

The mountain boy replied: "I'd be glad to go down to rescue the bird for free if you'll let my dad hold the rope."⁵

The scientists rely on their power, wealth and influence to get what they wanted. That only resulted in a huge frustration. The boy relies on the trust he has in his dad. That's all he needed to accomplish the task. What a wake up call for us! What does this teach us?

It all depends on who is holding our rope! Who is our true security permits us to let go of the things that hold us captive—the erroneous assumption that we have to rely on ourselves: our own power, authority and wealth. We have to choose—will we rely on mammon or God to hold us secure? To make things possible?

Here's another way of looking at it:



“John G. Paton (1824-1907) was one of the great missionaries to the South Sea Islanders. In translating the Scriptures into the native language, he could find no word for "believe." Since the concept of "belief" is so basic to the Christian faith, and to the New Testament, he could not finish his translation.

One day an exhausted islander came into his home, threw himself down in a chair, put his feet up on another chair, stretched his body and

⁵ --With thanks to Jim Moore, Houston, Texas.

sighed how great it felt to be able to lean his whole weight on those two chairs. Instantly Paton knew his quest for the right word had ended. For belief is at its most basic level "leaning our whole weight" on God, surrendering to God's strength, not ours. Belief is not an act of truth. It is an act of trust."⁶

Trust is about a relationship—not about the things we possess or think if we possessed them all will be well. None of us can ever achieve enough economic success or education or intellect or hard work to think that we would have the resource to change the world.

But there is a resource big enough, free and available to us that provides what we need to permit us to go about the work of changing the world moment by moment AND permits us to have the strong assurance of ultimate success. It isn't a what or a thing. It is a who. That who is God. The God we know in Jesus Christ. And with that knowledge comes an optimism the world scoffs at.

It's like this:



“Here is one of President Ronald Reagan's favorite stories. Waking up to her 12th birthday, a young farm girl got up before dawn and ran out to the barn. She had asked her parents for a pony and was hoping that it would be there. She flung open the barn door, but in the dim light, could see no pony. Only mounds of

horse manure. Being an optimist she declared, "With all this manure around, there must be a pony in there somewhere."

People, Christian optimism trusts that with all this manure in the world, there's definitely a God at work in here somewhere!

Let us choose to believe in the life giving alternative of God's way. As Robert Fulghum declares in The Storyteller's Creed:

"I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge.

That myth is more potent than history.

That dreams are more powerful than facts.

That hope always triumphs over experience.

That laughter is the only cure for grief.

And I believe that love is stronger than death."⁷

⁷ -- Storyteller's Creed
from Robert Fulghum

⁶ Homiletics Illustrations