

May 25, 2008
Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Matthew 6:24-33
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“Letting Go and Holding On”

As the end of school approaches, those of us who are older may think back on the carefree days of summer when there was time to sleep late, hang out with friends, play outside all day, take a trip with the family or spend time at the lake. We remember with a wistful smile a time when days seemed long and summer endless. We romanticize about a time when the responsibilities and anxieties of life seemed far away.

Summer is wonderful. The seasons of the year and the seasons of life all bring their special joys. Yet, there is always a gap between our memory and how things really were. Before we lose ourselves thinking that worry and anxiety belong only to adulthood and carefree play to childhood, we need to hear the results of a survey of adolescents. The survey revealed that children in our society worry a lot. They worry about school grades, looks or appearance, problems at home and being liked. They also worry about being out of shape, the future, failing or disappointing a loved one and problems their friends are having (Source: *www.KidsHealth.org*). Their worries are not so different from those things that make adults anxious: work, relationships, family, money, health, the future. We worry about our spiritual life, the environment, our society, the war, the economy and retirement. I can guarantee that if it is something that touches people's lives, then there are people who are worrying about it.

Some worry is constructive. A moment of worry about starting a paper, a project or a job can motivate us to do something about it. Worrying about a friend or a relationship can move us to help another person or to say we are sorry to someone we have hurt. Worry is a little like pain; it is one of those signals that something is not right and we need to take action to do something about it.

Not all worry leads to action. Not all worry is productive. Some worry is all out of proportion to the difficulty or concern we are facing. In fact, incessant worry can be debilitating. Anxiety can be so constant and pervasive that we become sick and need professional help. An anxiety disorder can paralyze us and rob us of abundant life. Thank God there are caring pastoral counselors, therapists and physicians who can help us find that abundant life again.

We wonder if God cares about our deep worries and anxious concerns. Sometimes it feels as if we have to bear the weight of our troubles alone. Then we hear the words of Jesus, “Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink or about your body, what you will wear.” But we do worry! Having someone tell us not to worry doesn't seem like much help at all.

Jesus invites us to step back from our anxious thoughts and see the way in which God cares for creation. He points to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. He makes the point how much more God cares for each one of us. He wants us to put our worries in a larger context. Our freedom from worry is found in the providence of God; that is, the way in which God provides for the creation. Yet, we might object that we see not only soaring birds and beautiful lilies, but we also see seasons of drought and famine, violent earthquake and devastating storms. As I said in the sermon last week, we see signs of disorder in the creation that God has so carefully ordered.

Do these painful realities negate the words of Jesus? Jesus does not mean that there will be no difficulties and struggles in life. He does not mean that there will never be seasons when the fishing is bad and the crops fail. The very people who heard his words knew disease, heartbreak, hunger, political violence and death. Yet, underneath the good and bad experiences of life, there are the everlasting arms of God. We hear this truth in the first question of The Heidelberg Catechism, “What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.” It is our faithful Savior who says, “Do not worry about your life.” I don't think that anyone who is burdened down with worry has ever been helped by another person saying, “Don't worry.” What makes the

difference is that Jesus is the one who says it.

Jesus knows that our lives are more than what we eat, wear and drink. Our lives are more than how successful we are, how well we do in school or how many friends we have. Our lives are even about more than how long or short we live. What matters is living an abundant life in God. Our incessant, needless worry can keep us from focusing on the things that matter. This is why Jesus says, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given you as well." To live a spiritually abundant life is to let go of our worry and take hold of the promises of God. When we seek God's kingdom first, we get our priorities straight, we see things more clearly and we get our true life back.

In Deuteronomy, Moses prepares the children of Israel for life in the Promised Land. They have lived so long in the wilderness that many have thought that all their worries will be over when they enter a land flowing with milk and honey. They have spent so many years pitching tents, sleeping on the ground, shivering in the cold, sweltering in the heat, foraging for food, rationing water and moving from one place to another that the Promised Land sounds as worry-free as Disney Land. Moses knows that a settled existence in a land surrounded by hostile nations and people who worship other gods will bring its own worry and temptation. Moses knows that planting crops, fishing from boats, building houses, establishing families and living together in villages will create a whole host of new things about which to worry.

He wants them to get first things first. He wants them to know the secret of a life free from anxiety and worry. He wants them to stay focused on what matters. Moses knows that the key is worship. He tells the people that when the first harvest is gathered, they are to take some of the first fruits of the harvest and place it before God and say the words of the ancient creed:

"A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly, we cried to the Lord and the Lord heard our voice and brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey." (Deut. 26 selected verses)

Moses knew that we neglect our worship, our devotions and our giving at our own spiritual peril. When we fail to worship, we forget who we are and who God is. When we fail to spend time meditating and praying, we give ourselves and our thoughts over to our worries. When we fail to give of the bounty of what God has given us, we begin to think we are the producers and owners and not the managers and stewards of the good gifts of God. In worship, devotion and giving we let go of our worries and take hold of God's promises.

There are so many things that cause us to worry. Some parents are consumed with worry about a child who is struggling to find her place and to hold her life together. This Memorial Weekend, as we remember those who have given their lives in service to our county, we also think about those whose lives are at risk as they serve in places of violence and war. With rising gas prices, presidential politics and economic uncertainty, we can be easily overwhelmed with worry. Graduation season also brings its own time of excitement, but also anxiety, as high school and college graduates face new decisions, new work or study, new challenges and new places that can be far from home. These are all real concerns.

Yet, we have one reason not to be overwhelmed by our worry. This past week I received a note from one of our high school graduates who is preparing to go to college. In his brief note he talked about what has helped him in his life. He said that through worship over the years and through the mission trips in which he participated he has learned "the importance of living a Christ-centered life." You might say that he has learned the secret of letting go of worry and holding on to Christ.

Jesus said, "I tell you, therefore, do not worry....Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given you as well."