

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost- October 22, 2023

Scripture lessons: Psalm 37:1-8 & Matthew 6:25-33

WORRY, WORRY, WORRY

Two Christians are in an airplane at 35,000 feet. For one, it's his first flight and he's nervous about it. He squirms in his seat. He constantly looks out the window to see if the wings are still there. At even the slightest bump, he grips his armrests with white knuckles.

The other man is an air travel veteran. He's completely at ease with flying, but wants to help his Christian brother to calm down a bit, too. He says to him, "Didn't Jesus tell us, 'I am with you always, even to the ends of the earth'?"

Agitated, his seatmate replies, "No! Jesus didn't say that! He said, 'Lo, I am with you always.' He said *nothing* about what happens when you get up this *high*."

This man's worry had badly warped his skill at Biblical interpretation. But I imagine we can still easily sympathize or even identify with an anxious, first-time flyer. Fretting about our safety is likely one of our most common worries.

Today's Scripture readings name several more for us. In Matthew 6, Jesus highlights concerns about food and drink, appearance and health. Will we have enough? Will we look good? Will we be well? Psalm 37 talks about those who prosper through wrongdoing. We wonder how it's fair for people like that to end up with so much. We worry about being left behind as chumps if we play by the rules.

Jesus and the psalmist are realists. They know that we worry and that worry can take us over. They understand how easily we can become anxious about all sorts of things with money, status, health, and security being among the most prominent.

Or we worry about our relations with and the choices of those closest to us or of those who have power or influence over us: our spouses, parents, children, and other relatives, our friends, bosses, co-workers, and peers, criminals, terrorists, the government, the economy, other governments, the *world* economy. Do any of those or other things worry us *now*?

If so, let's focus on them and hear Jesus say, "Don't worry." Let's bring them front and center in our minds and hearts and hear the psalmist say, "Don't fret". These biblical sages *are* realists. They understand that as common and as tempting as it is, worry is, in truth, *senseless*. It senselessly *wastes* our time and energy. Jesus makes this point forcefully in his Sermon on the Mount when he says, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" (verse 27)

The answer, of course, is no, and yet, we do worry. Why?

The root of it seems to lie in one or both of two things. First, we want to control things that are not ours to control *or* we fear and fail to control things that rightly are our responsibility, or both. The first of these is a vain and useless desire. The second is a sad and sorry immaturity. Giving in to one or both not only wastes our time and energy; it also frequently leads to big trouble. As the psalmist says, "Don't fret- it leads only to evil" (verse 7).

What kinds of evil? The psalmist names a few- envy and vengefulness, anger and wrath (verses 1, 6, & 8). When, however, you think *personally* of times when you've given in to worry, what has it done to you?

If you're like me, it has probably clouded both your judgment and your emotions so that, on the one hand, you've been foolishly impatient, impulsive, and insensitive in what you've done or, on the other hand, woefully weak, cowardly, and irresponsible in what you haven't done, or both. Either you've tried to force your will where it couldn't and shouldn't be forced, or you've shrunk back and failed to act in ways that properly were your responsibility, or both. Either way or both together frequently lead to a big mess.

So, what should we do instead? Our Scriptures plainly teach that the best alternative to worry is trust in God. Jesus and the psalmist each say it in their own way. From the psalmist: "Trust in the Lord, and do good . . . Take delight in the Lord . . . Commit your way to the Lord . . . Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him" (verses 3-5 & 7).

From Jesus: "(Y)our heavenly Father knows that you need all these things (food, drink, clothes, etc.). But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (verses 32-33).

God calls us to trust- trust that God has and will give us the wisdom and strength to discern and take care of those things that are our responsibility *and* that God can and will take care of all the rest that is not and cannot be in our control. Heeding this, we can move from restless and useless anxiety in ourselves to a calm and purposeful centering in God. We can leave behind the heat of grinding worry and enter instead the cool of a relaxed trust.

I'm a big sports fan, so I'll offer a sports analogy here that I think can help with this. It draws on something that athletes characteristically say in describing a particular difficulty that they sometimes face in their performances. I especially remember Michael Jordan, widely acclaimed as the best basketball player of all time, speaking of it once during the prime of his career after a hard-fought playoff victory.

For the first three quarters of that game, Jordan hadn't played well. But in the fourth quarter, he caught fire. At the end of the game, when it counted the most, he always seemed to be in the right place at the right time, making all the plays that he'd made so often before, all the plays that his team counted on him to make.

After the game, a reporter asked him what had made the difference for him in the final stanza. Why suddenly was he back at the top of his game after being so badly off it earlier on?

Jordan said that in the first three quarters he had tried too hard. He wanted so badly to win that he tried to "force things that weren't there". He'd been anxious that in that game every possession somehow put the whole championship on the line. He anxiously tried to control things that simply weren't there for his control.

Thrown off-kilter by those misguided efforts, he frequently ended up *out* of control, *unable* to take advantage of the opportunities that otherwise were there for him. Eventually, he saw that he needed to back off a bit. He needed to relax and, as he put it, "let the game come to me". In the fourth quarter he did exactly that, and it made all the difference.

At the game's end, he didn't try to "force things that weren't there". Instead, he entered the game's distinctive flow. Understanding that its internal rhythm would give him plenty of opportunities to play well, he started to move with rather than against its grain. Trusting the game enough to "let it come to him", he found himself repeatedly in position to make every

play that he needed to make. No longer anxious and trying to do too much, he in fact was able to do much more, which proved to be more than enough since, as usual, the game, in its own good time, gave him abundant opportunities to put his skills to their best use, which he did.

Jordan learned once again that he needed simply to trust the game. Trusting it enabled him to do everything he rightly could do- no more and no less. For all the rest, he could trust.

It's the same in our life with God. God has made and continues to make and redeem this beautiful, yet fallen world. In it, day by day, God creates rhythm and flow through which, in God's own good time, God gives us every opportunity that we need to live this life well.

To be sure, we regularly lose touch with God's rhythm. We struggle against it or become deaf to its music. Filled with worry, we try too hard to make our own music, or stop trying to move with God's at all, or both. In which case, like Michael Jordan, we need to step back. We need to relax and let God's game come to us.

In its flow, we can do all that we rightly can and need to do. In synch with its time, we can leave everything else in God's hands. In harmony with God's moves, we can trust that even when we lose touch, God's rhythm still will be going strong. God's flow will still be moving freely, surging yet again to create new openings through which God's game can once more come to us.

We don't have to worry. We really can trust in God. That's the bottom line.

This came home unforgettably to John Kavanaugh in a conversation that he once had with Mother Teresa. As Jesuit priest, Father Kavanaugh became a long-time and much beloved professor of philosophy at St. Louis University. Fiercely determined not only to think, teach, and write well about the Christian faith, but to *live* it as faithfully as he could, he went during a time of uncertainty about his priestly vocation, to live for a year at Mother Teresa's "House for the Dying" in Calcutta, India.

On his first day there, he was blessed and surprised to meet Mother Teresa herself. She asked him, "John, what can I do for you?" He told her frankly of the concern that had brought him to her community. He had no clarity about what God wanted him to do next with his life. He thought that the depth, challenge, and beauty of Mother Teresa's and her sisters' work might help him to figure that out. He said, "Mother, please pray that I might have clarity about God's next step for me."

Mother Teresa looked at him sternly and replied, "No, I will not do that." Taken aback, Kavanaugh asked her, "Why not?" She answered, "Clarity is the last thing you're clinging to. Clarity is what you need to let go of."

Kavanaugh wasn't ready to let it go at that. He said, "Mother, you seem to have plenty of clarity about what God wants you to do." Mother Teresa laughed out loud. She said, "No, I've never had clarity. But I've always had trust. I'll pray for you, John, to trust in God, no matter what."

Let that be the prayer for all of us always. And especially in times of major decision, in times when we yearn for control, hunger for clarity, and are sorely tempted by worry, let's pray that we will trust in God, no matter what. Amen.