2-25/26-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Matthew 6:24-34 Choose God Choosing God’s Kingdom Series

Listen for a moment to Dan’s description of himself, and see if you can relate.

Dan says: On the outside I'm affable and easy going. That's a genuine part of my personality, and not a masquerade. And my life is full of God's goodness many orders of magnitude beyond anything I might have reasonably expected, earned, and deserved. Still, despite a friendly exterior and a fortunate life, on the inside my engines are always running. And so I worry. I make lists of things to do, like "take out the trash for curbside collection." As if I'd forget this trivial chore after doing it every Tuesday morning for thirteen years. Only a worrier knows the satisfaction of crossing out something on your to-do list; there's nothing quite so satisfying as looking at those dark horizontal slashes through each line item. At night I find it hard to locate the off switch for my brain, and so I've become a predictably fitful sleeper. My wife calls this "whizzy brain," and even though she's a deep sleeper, every once in a while even she succumbs to it. And I'm definitely a "clock head" who'd rather be an hour early than five minutes late.

 --Dan Clendenin 5-19-08 Journeywithjesus.net

Can you relate to any part of Dan’s story? *[I saw some heads nodding]*

I can relate to Dan—especially his “whizzy brain.” I know Jesus says not to worry, yet there are many a night where I still struggle to fall asleep because I am worrying my brain and heart over something. Sometimes I am stressing over what still needs to get finished that week, or anxious about what will not get finished that week. Oftentimes I find myself worrying over things I cannot control, such as how someone may respond in a conversation, in what direction our country is headed, or if our house will ever close. Occasionally I find myself worrying over how to encourage you to grow in faith or whether there will still be a vital church for my children when they reach my age.

I know Jesus says that worry will not add a single hour to my life, and I know from experience that worry will deprive me of my sleep. But still I struggle at times with worry and anxiety. Don’t you?

In the time of Jesus, many of the worries of his followers in rural Galilee

had to do with the basic necessities of life. Beggars sought food enough for each day. Widows relied on the mercy of others for even a place to sleep. Family inheritances were jeopardized by high tax rates. Rome threatened crucifixion for any who questioned their authority.

In every generation there are many people around the world who worry not only about oppressive governmental authority but also worry about the basic necessities of life, worrying about sustainable food and clean water, decent clothing and livable housing.

Many of us here today don’t need to worry about the basic necessities of life.

We have clothes in our closet, food in our cupboard, and a roof over our heads.

If we worry about what to eat or what to wear we are trying to decide which restaurant will be less crowded today or what outfit to wear tomorrow that is not hopelessly out of date. Instead of worrying about the basic necessities of life, our worries run deeper, as we worry about cancer, terrorism, safety for our children, job loss, health insurance, and credit card debt.

Whatever we worry about, does our worry gain us anything? Does it get us anywhere? Since worry tends to raise our stress levels, make us paranoid, and literally shave minutes off our life span, what good does it do us to worry?

..Stress management experts say that only two percent of our "worrying time" is spent on things that might actually be helped by worrying. The other 98 percent of this time is spent: 40% on things that never happen, 35% on things that can't be changed, 15% on things that turn out better than expected, 8% on useless, petty worries.

--Brian Stoffregen, Exegetical Notes sermons.com adapted

..There was a family traveling out of town for vacation. As they were traveling down the highway, the mother remembered that the family had traveled this highway two years ago when they went on vacation. She recalled a certain place where they were detoured as a major bridge was out along the way so for the next hour she worried the family and herself about how they would be delayed because of the bridge being out. She kept going on and on “I hate that we will get delayed because the stupid bridge is out”. As the family neared the bridge, there was a sign that read “Newly Constructed Bridge – Open for Your Convenience”.

--Tony Britt sermoncentral.com 7-01

..For several years a woman had been having trouble getting to sleep at night because she feared burglars. One night her husband heard a noise in the house, so he went downstairs to investigate. When he got there, he did find a burglar. "Good evening," said the man of the house. "I am pleased to see you. Come upstairs and meet my wife. She has been waiting 10 years to meet you."  --William Marshall, Eternity Shut in a Span Sermonillustrations.com

Of all the living things that God created, we human beings are the only ones that worry.

Yet Jesus admonishes us—don’t worry! Isn’t life more than food and the body more than clothes?

Consider the birds, Jesus says. They do not work like we do, yet God cares for them. The little sparrow is the most common bird in Israel. God feeds that little bird. And we count more to God than even the little sparrow.

Consider the wildflowers, Jesus says. The lilies of the field are wildflowers that are not planted nor pruned, yet they bloom and grow, many never to be seen by the human eye. God has designed and clothed each and every flower. If dandelions and poinsettias and wild flowers alongside a highway grow in brilliant color and design, how much more does God want to see us blossom and bloom in life?

If God has taken such care over the little sparrow and the abundant wildflowers, will not God care for us, for men and women created in God’s own image?

.Said the Robin to the Sparrow,
"I should really like to know

Why these anxious human beings

Rush about and hurry so."
Said the Sparrow to the Robin,
"Friend, I think that it must be

That they have no Heavenly Father

Such as cares for you and me." --Peterjblackburn.com 3-19-96

Although worry is part of our human nature, to be constant worry warts is not who we are created or called to be. We are called to trust God. In all things. From our closets to our tables to our daily lives.

Worry pulls us away from healthy relationships not only with God, but also with one another.

Think about when you worry. Can you focus on anything else when you worry? Can you be fully present with those around you? Can you experience true joy and contentment when your mind is distracted by what may or may not happen? Some of you sitting here today will readily admit that you do not multi-task well. Yet is that not what worry tries to get us to do with our minds, our hearts, our energy—divide our attention and split our focus?

According to Fred Craddock, the Greek term here translated as worry has a base of meaning “split attention” or “divided concern.” --Fred Craddock, Preaching Through the Christian Year: A

 Quoted by Mark Suriano ucc.org sermon seeds 2-27-11

Worry is the result of our struggle to divide our loyalties, to split our attention between two masters. We cannot concentrate on both God and wealth. We cannot concentrate on both what God considers important and also on what we think is so important. We cannot concentrate on the here and now if we are worrying over what might be.

So Jesus teaches us to turn our attention to God rather than waste our time in worry. Jesus teaches us to make God our priority in life rather than the pursuit of money or the affirmation of others. How often do we turn to wealth as our god, trusting money to buy us happiness or security or peace of mind or even the basic necessities of life? While it is important to hold down a job and to pay our bills, Jesus reminds us that honoring God should be our first priority in life, no matter what we do for a living. God seeks to be our one and only master.

For that past six weeks, Jesus has challenged us through his Sermon on the Mount to choose God’s kingdom, to put God in the center of our lives so that God’s influence is felt in all we say and do. For six weeks, we have listened to Jesus calling us to a higher standard of living as his disciples, to follow a different set of values and different priorities than the world around us.

We have been called to choose blessedness, to choose light, to choose life and love and humility. Finally, today we are called to make the greatest choice of all, a choice that undergirds the rest—we are called to choose God, and by choosing God, to choose to live by God’s ways in this world.

Bruce Larson powerfully illustrates this call to choose God through showing people two statues near his counseling office in New York City. He says:

Often I would suggest they walk with me from my office down to the RCA Building on Fifth Avenue. In the entrance of that building is a gigantic statue of Atlas, a beautifully proportioned man who, with all his muscles straining, is holding the world upon his shoulders. There he is, the most powerfully built man in the world, and he can barely stand up under this burden. ‘Now that’s one way to live,’ I would point out to my companion, ‘trying to carry the world on your shoulders. But now come across the street with me.’
"On the other side of Fifth Avenue is Saint Patrick’s Cathedral, and there behind the high altar is a little shrine of the boy Jesus, perhaps eight or nine years old, and with no effort he is holding the world in one hand. My point was illustrated graphically.

"We have a choice. We can carry the world on our shoulders, or we can say, ‘I give up, Lord; here’s my life. I give you my world, the whole world.’"

 --Bruce Larson, Believe and Belong, quoted by Paul Fritz, 5-03, sermoncentral.com

Seek ye first the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness. Then all these things will be added unto you. Allelu, alleluia. Is that not what we sang moments ago?

We are called to “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

And all these things will be given to you as well.” --NRSV

Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don’t worry about missing out.

You’ll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. —TMSG

This is the crux of our passage today, and not only our passage, but our entire series.

We are not called to simply sit back and watch the world go by, fretting about what may or may not happen. We are not called to be paralyzed by the past, stuck to worn-out ways of serving, loving and living. This is not a call to be passive and let God miraculously take care of our lives.

When we strive for God’s kingdom ways in our world, we are actively engaging in sharing the good news of Jesus, actively seeking to love others in the name of Jesus, actively living by God’s desires for our lives and for our world.

We live by faith not to earn our salvation, but in response to God’s grace. We live by faith not trying to guard against tomorrow but trusting God for today and tomorrow.

God is with us, and God promises to care for us. This does not mean that as Christians we will not face our times of struggle, even for the basic necessities of life. This trust does not take us away from the evil and unfairness of life and death and illness and struggle. This also does not mean that bread will fall from heaven or God will provide us with a million dollar mansion. God is not a genie in a bottle granting all our wishes and desires. We are still called to plan, still called to be cautious, still called to be concerned with our quality of life. God still calls us to care well for ourselves and those around us.

Yet when we strive for God’s kingdom ways in our world, we can trust that God is present with us. For today. For tomorrow. For all eternity.

Then no matter what we face, even in the harshest of circumstances, we remember and gives thanks that God is with us, that God cares for us. With God on our side, who are we to worry?

..J. Arthur Rank, an English executive, decided to do all his worrying on one day each week. He chose Wednesdays. When anything happened that gave him anxiety and annoyed his ulcer, he would write it down and put it in his worry box and forget about it until next Wednesday. The interesting thing was that on the following Wednesday when he opened his worry box, he found that most of the things that had disturbed him the past six days were already settled. It would have been useless to have worried about them.-Source Unknown. Sill:worry

Jesus is a realist. He knows that many of his initial followers, and many of his followers up to and beyond us here today, have to struggle each and every day for the basic necessities of life. He is not telling us to stop working, but to realize our lives are greater than what we do.

He knows that we will all face trouble of one kind or another in our lives. How many of us ever wonder when the next shoe will drop, so to speak, when the next unexpected crisis will hit in our lives? Yet our lives are also greater than what we experience.

We are God’s beloved. Recognizing that our lives will never be perfect, yet we are still called to live into what we believe, do we choose to trust God more and worry less? Do we choose to trust God not only with our eternal futures, but also with our daily lives, today and tomorrow?

When we strive for God’s kingdom, when we seek to live by God’s ways, the focus of our lives will shift. And with a shift in focus comes a different set of values. And with a different set of values comes a different way of living. And with a different way of living comes a deeper faith.

As Eugene Peterson declares in The Message: “What I’m trying to do here is to get you to relax,

to not be so preoccupied with *getting*, so you can respond to God’s *giving*. People who don’t know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don’t worry about missing out. You’ll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.” (V32-33)

Our passage ends today with these words: “Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don’t get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.”

MSG v34

“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” NRSV v34

Someone once said, “Every tomorrow has two handles. We can take hold of it by the handle of anxiety or by the handle of faith.” --Wit and Wisdom, p. 173

When we trust God not only with our todays, but also with our tomorrows, then we can move from selfish worry to healthy concern for others. In doing so we free up energy that we can then use to give meaning to our lives as well as to the lives of those around us.

As David Leininger once said, .. If we spend all our energies worrying about whether we will have enough food to eat, we would never BEGIN to be concerned about whether or not anyone ELSE has enough. If we spend our energies worrying about our health and the length of our own life, we would not have TIME to care about anyone ELSE'S health. And if we become overly concerned about what clothes we have to wear, we surely will not be able to concern ourselves with the clothing that OTHER people need. The message of Jesus seems to be here that the way to overcome worry about yourself is to begin to worry about others. That is what kingdom living is going to be about.

-- David Leininger leiningers.com Winning Over Worry 3-12-00

We are called to concern for others, for concern will lead us to action. Worry, on the other hand, does nothing except raise our stress level.

How will our lives change if we live into Jesus’ call to be disciples following God’s kingdom ways? How will our lives change if we strive to keep first things first? How has your life changed already as a follower of Jesus? What is your witness of letting go and letting God care for your todays as well as your tomorrows? I encourage you to share your story of trusting in God with one other person this week.

We are each called to take one faithful step at a time into our preferred future. Today, that preferred future is a future of trust, not worry, of faith, not fear, of hope, not despair.

May you strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

That is Jesus’ call to us today.

Put God first. Put God’s ways first. In all you say and do, choose God.

May it be so. Let us pray.