



# Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Lockett Currie

Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God

Sermon for Epiphany 8 A, 2-27-11

Scripture: Isaiah 49: 8-16a, Matthew 6:24-34

I have chosen one of my favorite hymns, and the one we will sing at the end of the sermon, as the title of this week's sermon; however, I might have chosen Bobby McFerrin's 1988 hit, "Don't Worry, Be Happy". Most people worry to some degree; my mother was one of the greatest worriers I have ever known. Sometimes I scare myself by letting more worries and anxieties creep into my life. Let me see a show of hands out there from those that feel that they worry excessively?

Have you ever seen this cartoon that pictures a man alone in bed late at night? He's sitting up, scribbling on a note pad, and talking on the phone. In the caption he tells his friend, "When I can't sleep, I find that it sometimes helps to get up and jot down my anxieties." In the cartoon every square inch of the bedroom walls is covered with dozens of scribbled worries — war, recession, killer bees, aging, calories, sex, balding, and so on.

Back a few years ago a magazine article about stress management reported that only two percent of our "worrying time" is spent on things that might actually be helped by worrying. Of the other 98 % the breakdown was: 40% of our worries are on things that never happen; 35% on things that can't be changed; 15% on things that turn out better than expected; and the other 8% on useless, petty worries.

As a teenager and on through college, this scripture passage about not being anxious was one of my favorites, probably because of the lack of money in my family. My father worked managing a Hereford farm in Maine. For his work we got free rent on a small house and a salary of \$40 a week. I use to baby sit for 50 cents an hour and



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my first real job in 1956 as a cashier at Shaw's paid \$1 an hour. With inflation I suppose these figures are not particularly low; however, I felt poor. As I dreamed of college and a career, Jesus words about seeking first God's kingdom were very reassuring. In those days I was much more of a fundamentalist believer with a literal understanding of Scripture.

Jesus talks about serving two masters—God and money. He says if we try to do that, we will end up loving one and hating the other. Notice that Jesus does not say money is evil or even bad, just that it makes a poor master. If financial wealth is our god and we believe that it can satisfy our deepest needs than we probably feel that we will never have enough. If this is our orientation, the big drop in the stock market earlier last week and the high price of gas will send you into great anxiety.

Security is a huge concern for us all from the moment of birth. Psychologists agree that it is a basic human need throughout our life. In the Hebrew Bible reading the author of Second Isaiah tells the exiles that they will be sent home and to not worry, Yahweh will be with them all the way. This part of Isaiah is filled with promises that the people will find food, drink, pastures, and protection along the way. This scripture is calling the exiles to trust God in the midst of doubt and suffering. In the gospel reading Jesus is making the point that trusting God is the most fundamental source of our security. As a child and teenager, I was so comforted by this scripture, knowing if God took care of the birds in the sky and the flowers in the fields, God would take care of me.

Besides looking at the passage for reassurance and security, I believe there is another side, a side very much connected to last Sunday's sermon. For you that were here, I asked for you to write down anything that is in your way from being the person God wants you to be, a person that can love and forgive the way God loves. Roberta



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Bondi<sup>1</sup> writes about a group of early Christians, the Desert Fathers, and the answers they gave to the question I asked you. They talked about eight passions that kept them from loving as God loves. I believe looking at this side of the scripture is just as important part of Jesus' teachings as is the security/ don't worry part. I won't go into all of these passions but here are a couple she lists: "Being driven by the desire for food beyond satisfying hunger (gluttony); being driven to esteem ourselves and to disparage others (pride); and the one most like today's lesson: being driven to be self-dependent by amassing money and things; refusing the help of others when in need which they called avarice or greed. Some of the things you wrote last week corresponded to the passions above: self importance, pride, selfishness, insecurities, self absorbed. (By the way, I folded all these papers together and put a rubber band around them and plan from time to time to take them into my hand and lift them up to God, praying that somehow these blocks will be removed from you and you will allow God's healing love to transform you.)

Jesus says your heavenly Father knows what you need. If you strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness all these things will be given to you as well. (vv.32-33) He continues saying "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble for its own." (v.34) So it's obvious here that seeking God's kingdom does not take away our troubles, nor is it a promise of prosperity. What I think this passage does most is to shift our center, our thoughts from worry to God, so that worries do not overwhelm us. As any of you that do a lot of worrying know, these worries and anxieties keep us from the joy and gratitude of the moment. When we worry we make an idol of our worry because we are putting something else in a more important place than God. Another good reason not to

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<sup>1</sup> To Love As God Loves



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worry, I would suggest, is that worry obstructs the channels for the flow of God's love and grace to fill us.

Before I close I want to give you a story and a couple of poems that may help you deal with your worries. First a story about the Worry Tree by Mark Daniels: Once there was a man who had a "worry tree." He had a stressful executive position and every night, before he walked through the front door of his house, he touched a tree close to the porch and said, "God, all these worries I've been stewing over, I'm giving to you here now at the worry tree. I'll pick them up from You tomorrow if You seem to be telling me there's anything I can do about them. Otherwise, I'm turning them over to You...and thank You!"

The first poem is by Wendell Berry and may be familiar to you:

## The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.

And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

The last poem is from one of my online colleagues, Thom Shuman:



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**alterations, no charge**

**last night,**

**i hung up my worries**

**in the closet,**

**hoping the wrinkles**

**would smoothe out**

**by the next day;**

**i put my fears**

**into the laundry,**

**so they would**

**be clean enough**

**to wear again this week;**

**i made sure that**

**pebble called stress**

**was still in my shoe,**

**where it has worn**

**a hole into the heel.**

**but this morning,**

**when i opened the closet,**

**i found**

**a whole new outfit,**

**woven out of**



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**Easter lilies  
and resurrection's  
sweet grass  
and sandals  
made out of  
sparrow's feathers.  
turning,**

**i found you  
standing there,  
a tape measure  
around your neck,  
chalk in your hand,**

**saying with a smile,  
'try them on . . .  
so we can see  
if any alterations  
are needed'**

**Do you need any alterations or can you wear these new Easter clothes?**

**My prayer is that we may all leave this place and go forth with less time spent on our worries and more time spent on opening ourselves to the transforming power of God's love and grace. Amen, amen!!!**



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