

[18 pent 1stLu Blessing of Animals]

18 PENTECOST
OCT 7/8, 2017

FIRST, MARSHALL
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Exodus 16:2-4, 9-16; Matthew 6:25-33
Hakuna Matata

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Some passages from the Bible cause us to really **exercise** our thinkers as we **wrestle** with a saying or story whose message seems...less than clear... **Not** so today. In the Gospel lesson from the book of Matthew, Jesus says, Do not worry about your life...(6:25).



Then he points to the birds and the flowers, the animals and the plants, the fauna and flora of nature, and asks, *Do **they** worry about their next meal? or about the clothes they'll wear?*

The **answer** to these rhetorical questions is, of course, a **crystal clear, cut** and **dried, slam-dunk NO!** But **Jesus** isn't finished yet. With his **next** question, he takes one giant step away from parable **toward** practical when he says, in effect (6:27), *Let me put it this way: Can **any** of you, by **worrying** about something, make it **work out** the way you **want**?*

Then one more time for good measure, Jesus **drives home** his point by commanding us: *Do **not** worry about what you will eat, drink or wear* (6:31). **Hmm...**I wonder what Jesus is **trying** to **say here**...? Could it have something to do with that seductive, seditious, subversive sin called... **worry**? But **none** of *us* ever worry...right???

Well, here's some **good** news for anyone who struggles with the **bad** news of **worry**. Jesus gives a simple solution to this struggle when he tells his disciples (*and us!*): **don't do it... just say no!**

A similar suggestion is offered to us in the famous Broadway play and Disney movie, The Lion King.



The show tells the story of a lion cub named Simba who experiences some adversity, tries to hide from his troubles, then eventually grows up and saves the pride. However, while **running away** from his struggles, Simba meets two friends who teach him their “**problem-free philosophy**.” It’s called ***hakuna matata*** – which means “no worries” – a **fine** approach to life-- unless you’re **avoiding, ignoring, or** feeling **guilty** about something...

...which is exactly what’s going on with our young lion friend. Yet Simba thinks that he ignore his guilt simply by embracing the notion of ***hakuna matata*** – Simba even tries to convince himself that it’s the perfect way to approach life...until...a childhood friend from the pride finds him and reminds him of what he’s been ignoring...

It turns out that for him, ***hakuna matata*** is not a mental *place* of peace, but a *lie* about peace... Deep down, Simba is torn apart by a sense of guilt for what he thought he’d done. Which is why it never works *for you and me* to just sing ***hakuna matata*** or... ***just say no*** to *worry*.

Part of the problem is that we only worry about things that feel like they’re of the utmost **importance** at the time. Some are **silly** like: **taking** a test; **putting** together a project; **meeting** a deadline; or getting **caught** in a little lie. **Other** issues are more **deserving** of our concern, like: a **wounded relationship**; a **financial crisis**; a **difficult prognosis** from the doctor, or a terrifying tragedy like the demonic murders of so many innocent people in Las Vegas.

But...silly or serious, superficial or structural, **none of that matters** when it’s say... **3:00 a.m.** and our **weary spirits** can’t let go of worrying about what **might go** – or what **might have gone wrong**. And **here’s the kicker**: **oftentimes**, the **harder** we try to **stop** worrying, the **deeper** we **fall** into its **downward spiral**...

I'm convinced that part of what makes *worry* work so well in our lives is **really** an issue of feeling *powerless*.



Think about the Israelites in our O. T. passage for today:

- God caused 10 fearsome plagues that finally forced Pharaoh to let them go from Egypt
- God parted the sea to save them from the Egyptian army
- God led them by a pillar of fire by night and cloud by day
- God speaks to them through Moses...

And still they...complain, complain, complain...

Now, we **rarely** worry about things we have the power to change... instead, we tend to save our worry about things that we can't do a darn thing about anyway!

So Jesus' question hits the nail on the head: *Can any of you, by worrying, make anything good happen?* **No**, we all say...but knowing this truth in our **heads**, is **not** the same thing as embracing this truth in our **hearts**.

No, if we could **control** worry by simply **commanding** ourselves (or each other) to **stop** it, then it would not be a problem. So the question is this: **how are we supposed to deal with this demon? What works for YOU in YOUR battle against worry?**



Two things are **key** here. The **first** is Jesus' brilliant sentence at the end of today's lesson. At first it seems as if he takes a hard turn way out into left field: he's been pounding worry into the ground, then suddenly he says:

But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (6:33).

Don't worry & strive for God's kingdom –the two go hand in hand

Jesus **knows** that worry is like a *black hole* in physics – pulling **everything, even light**, into itself. **Worry** can only **drain** us of energy, strength, hope, trust!

So, get **rid** of it, says Jesus, **not** by *fighting against* it, but by **filling** our hearts and spirits with the gifts of with **God's** Spirit. We're called to embrace not the bad news of life nor our deep-seated fears, but the good news of life, our deep-seated hopes.

My wife, Carolyn, is a **teacher** and a **very wise** person as well (she married me, after all!!). But whenever our adult kids found themselves stuck in an emotional low, or languishing in a period of **worry**, eventually Carolyn would ask them: *Have you tried volunteering in a neighborhood school?* Her question had nothing to do with overcoming worry, but everything to do with neutralizing worry.

Pastor Brian Stoffregen tells about a speaker he once heard who held up an empty glass. He asked the question, *How can I get the **air** out of this glass?* He turned it over...the air didn't pour out. He shook it up and down...the air stayed in. **Finally**, he reached for a pitcher of water, and started **pouring** it. As the water filled the glass, the **emptiness** disappeared (www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt06x24.htm).



The **second** key to neutralizing worry is Jesus' wise move to draw our attention **outward** to our feathered, furry and flowery friends in nature. They are **always** a good reminder that **God**, who obviously loves and cares for **all** creation, in fact, **loves** and **cares for us** even **more**.

My brother-in-law and his wife used to have a big Golden Retriever named Buck. He was a beautiful dog with big, sad eyes – he made friends with everyone around their lake, so occasionally would spend the night at a neighbor's house.

One week he'd disappeared for a few days, so Sharyl had her eyes peeled for the dog when she was out for a walk. Sure enough, she spied him sitting on the porch of some new neighbors she hadn't yet met.

She knocked on the door and, when the woman answered, Sharyl apologized for their dog being a nuisance. *Oh no*, the woman said, *he's a blessing!* Sharyl kind of raised an eyebrow, but then her new neighbor shared the sad story of how their son had just died in a car accident.

His room was on the bottom floor of the house with a sliding-glass door that opened onto the lake. She said, *I was sitting on the floor in my son's room just crying my heart out when all of a sudden I looked up and saw this big, beautiful dog standing there. I let him in and he came right over, sat down next to me, so I put my arms around him and cried...* From that day we started calling him...**Pastor Buck!**

With that in mind, I'm sure you'll appreciate the lyrics to a delightful song that a friend once sent me. It's entitled "God and Dog" and does a **great** job of reinforcing Jesus' lessons for us: look to your **pets** – they *don't worry*, because they **love** and **trust**. Says the author:

*I look up and I see God...I look down and see my dog.
Simple spelling G-O-D, same word backwards D-O-G.
They would stay with me all day...I'm the one who walks away.
But both of them just wait for me...
and dance at my return with glee.*

*Both love me no matter what...Divine God and canine mutt.
I take it hard each time I fail, but God forgives, dog wags his tail.
God thought up and made the dog...dog reflects a part of God.
I've seen love from both sides now.
It's everywhere...Amen...bow-wow!*

*I look up and I see God...I look down and see my dog.
And in my human frailty I can't match their love for me.*

("God and Dog" http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H17edn_RZoY
written, recorded and animated by Wendy Francisco)

All of this says that the best medicine we have to start freeing ourselves from the demon of worry is to:

1. Do something positive and meaningful – as Jesus said to "*strive **first** for the kingdom of God*" – NOT to somehow try and EARN it, but to bless others with it...As Martin Luther said, God doesn't need your good works – but your neighbor could use them! AND...
2. To allow ourselves to experience God's all-powerful and all amazing grace through heaven's special angels – our flying, furry, fishy, or four-legged friends. Says the song: *bless the beasts and the children.*

So, I guess the only thing left for me to say is...*Amen...bow-wow!*