

“Don’t Worry, Be Grateful”

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November 18, 2018

Philippians 4:6-9 (NRSV)

⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Matthew 6:25-33 (NRSV)

²⁵“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. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

While in high school around 30 years ago, my older brother, Glenn, got into a little trouble with the police. It seems that my brother was caught making an “adjustment” to the sign in front of a local church. Glenn says that he wasn’t the only one taking part in this mischief, but he was the only one who didn’t get away fast enough when the police arrived. So, Glenn was taken to the police station while the pastor of the church was called. The pastor declined to press charges when he heard what they had actually changed the sign to read. You see, most wouldn’t be surprised if some teenage boys changed a church sign to read something humorous, but a little on the, ah, *coarse* side. But that’s not what they did. The church sign had read “Don’t worry, it may not happen.” Glenn and his friends changed it to read, “Don’t worry – be happy.”

This was around the time that a little song by that name was at the top of the Billboard chart. Bobby McFerrin’s song was an unlikely hit, but it seemed to strike a chord with many people. It has been included on several movie soundtracks and many television shows. It reached number one in September of 1988 – thirty years ago – but it still resonates with us. However, if you somehow have missed this hit, the gist of the song is summed up in these lines, which are repeated through the song: “In every life we have some trouble, When you worry you make it double. Don’t worry, be happy.” That’s the basic premise of the song – worrying about your troubles doubles your troubles, so don’t worry, be happy.

The pastor of the church didn’t mind so much that the sign out front now read “don’t worry, be happy.” Perhaps it’s a decent summary of our gospel text for today. Maybe that’s what Jesus was saying – don’t worry, be happy. Or, maybe you’d prefer the line from the Disney movie *The Lion King*: “hakuna matata,” which means “no worries.” Or, maybe you are more in tune with Alfred E. Newman from Mad Magazine. His motto is “What, me worry?”

Is that what Jesus was saying? “Don’t worry, be happy,” or “hakuna matata – no worries,” or “What, me worry?” Well, in a way, yes! Jesus said don’t worry about what you will eat or drink

or wear. He said the birds don't worry, yet God feeds them. The flowers of the field don't worry, yet look how beautiful they are. He said worrying can't add time to our lives, and what He didn't say was that worrying can actually do the opposite.

Modern science has explained for us the truth of Jesus' statements about worry. Worry is actually damaging to our bodies. Worry causes stress, which causes break-down of our bodies, and can actually shorten our lives. It's true, we shouldn't worry. God knows what we need, and worry can't help us with the essentials of life.

So, what should we do with our time instead of worrying? Is it as simple as "be happy?" Well, that's a component of what we should do. Though it is hard for me to believe, Thanksgiving Day is this Thursday. It seems like we should barely be in September, not here toward the end of November, but it is true. Thanksgiving Day is a day set aside to....well, rest up to go shopping very early on the day after Thanksgiving, right? Or even on Thanksgiving day now! Shopping seems to be the preoccupation of our society. What are the best bargains that can be had on Friday? Our priorities really show at this time of year in our consumer-driven society. The day on which we celebrate Thanksgiving is actually a result of our shopping needs, or more specifically, retailers' needs. In 1939, the United States was not yet out of the Great Depression, and stores were hurting. Fred Lazarus, Jr. was the founder of Federated Department Stores, which today goes by the name Macy's. Lazarus was friends with Franklin D. Roosevelt and he convinced the president to move Thanksgiving Day a week earlier to give people more time to shop. As my former seminary professor Paul Dekar put it, "We were becoming a nation of buyers rather than believers, feasters instead of fasters, football fans, not people focused on God."

But that's not what Thanksgiving should be about, and can be about. It should be about our recognition of the source of our blessings and our appreciation for family and friends. It should be about gratitude to God, who tells us to not worry about what we will wear or eat or drink. It

should be about thankfulness to God for gifts we have received, however meager they may be, even when finances are not what we pray they would be. Even in such a time, all of us have been blessed extravagantly. Even if all of our possessions were taken away, each of us has been blessed with life and the love of our creator. And yet, we all have so much more to be thankful for.

It's a matter of attitude. In his book "Every Day Deserves a Chance," Max Lucado tells many good stories. I want to share a couple of them with you. The first is the story of Matthew Henry, who wrote Bible commentaries that are on the shelves of many pastors. Henry was robbed, and here is what he wrote in his journal afterwards: "Let me be thankful first because I was never robbed before; second, because although they took my purse, they did not take my life; third, because although they took my all, it was not much; and fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed."

Then, there is the story of Scott Simpson's caddie. Lucado says that Scott Simpson was telling his caddie about the beauty of the Augusta National Golf Club. Lucado says "Augusta National is to golfers what the Smithsonian is to history buffs: the ultimate experience. The course explodes in beauty. You would think you'd walked into an oil painting." In describing to his caddie this course and how it is manicured, Simpson said "You won't see a single weed all week." So, imagine how Simpson felt when, after five days of walking the course, his caddie pointed to the ground and announced to Scott, "I found one!"

Aren't we just as guilty of finding the one weed among the astounding beauty? We live as people individually blessed by God, and yet we go on weed hunts, missing the flowers in the process. Yes, there's always something about which we can complain, and we'll find it when we look for it. So, why do we look? Let's take our eyes off the weed hunt and instead focus on the bountiful blessings of God!

Paul Dekar, the professor I mentioned earlier, gave an alphabetical list of words that Biblical authors used to give praise to God. It's pretty good, so I'll quote it here: acknowledge, adore, bless, boast in, declare the mighty works of, extol, fall on one's face, give thanks, glorify, honor, invoke, kneel, magnify, offer gifts or sacrifices, praise, rejoice in, sanctify, sing hymns to, sing psalms, and worship. There are also special words of thanksgiving such as hallelujah, hosanna and amen. The Bible records outbursts of praise, like *Holy, Holy, Holy* (Isa 6:3), *Worthy is the Lamb* (Rev 5:12) and *Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ* (1 Cor 15:57). Paul reminds us, *as we sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among ourselves, let us sing and make melody to the Lord in our hearts, giving thanks to God at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.* (Eph 5:19-20).

There are so many ways we have of giving thanks to God almighty, the source of all of our blessings, and I encourage us to think about such words as we gather with friends or family during the coming holidays. Sing songs of praise, shout words of praise, give silent prayers of praise! Praise our God, give thanks to God. Use the powerful words found in the Bible. And yet, as Mary Jo Leddy says in her book *Radical Gratitude*, "What we say with our words is so much less important than what we mean with our lives. Only our lives give weight to our words." Praise God, yes. Give thanks to God, yes. But more importantly, live lives of praise and thanksgiving. Our words are important, but how we live our lives is vital. How we live our lives will determine the joy that others see. If we go shopping on Friday and are pushing and shoving to get the last of whatever the hit toy is this year and then go get in the car with the "What Would Jesus Do?" bumper sticker, we are not living a life of gratitude. If we are more concerned this Christmas about marking names off our shopping lists than about celebrating the gift of Jesus Christ, we are not living a life of gratitude. A life of gratitude is its own reward. A life free of worry is its own

reward, or so I'm told. I'm not there yet, and maybe you are not, either, so let's help each other on the journey.

So, don't worry, be happy! Trust in God Almighty, who knows your needs and values you so much more than the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. Be grateful and live lives of gratitude! And have a very Happy Thanksgiving! Amen.