



WHAT? ME WORRY?
Philippians 4:4-7, Matthew 6:25-34

Ever since 9/11 we look at CNN or our newspaper for our daily terrorism index. Is it orange – red – or yellow? Worry is common to all in this sanctuary today. Worry needs no invitation – it just comes uninvited into all of our lives. We worry because we are vulnerable. As we grow older we become more aware of that vulnerability. Disease may strike – the economy shifts – rumors of plant closings and layoffs - the mortgage – health insurance – college tuition – divorce – grades – retirement - nursing homes for aging parents. You can name others from your own personal experience. Do you feel exhausted? Whoever called the modern era ‘**The Age of Anxiety**’ certainly had read their mail and ours. So in a world that at times seems completely out of control – each of us will face times of anxiousness and fear.

Recently, the Board of Pensions of our Annual Conference strongly suggested that all pastors 54 years and older attend a Pre-Retirement Seminar. I almost tore up the invitation in denial – but St. Mary insisted we go. It is too late to plan for retirement when you actually retire. Talk about anxiety and worry. The good news is that Social Security won’t run out of money until 2041. The bad news is I can’t retire at Garden Spot Retirement Center unless they set up a tent city for us low-incomers.

I guess my antenna is up because I was at a bookstore and noticed a book entitled, **12 STEPS TO A WORRY-FREE RETIREMENT**. I almost bought it.

I have been developing a really good relationship with our 2 grown children and 2 granddaughters. The thought of them picking our nursing home and visiting us really scares and worries me. So if you want someone who is experienced in worrying – I have some experience to get you over yours. So do what I say – **not what I do**.

An ancient Chinese parable tells of Old Tan Chang who purchased a small farm at the base of a large mountain. The soil and landscape was very rocky. Friends and family members counseled him not to purchase the land. They looked at the rocks and said, “There are not enough days in the year for you to clear the land.” He just smiled.

Each day he and his sons set a quota of how many rocks and boulders they would remove. After six months of labor – enough land was cleared – seeds were planted – and the sun could now shine on the land. Old Tan Chang said, “I will remove as many rocks and boulders as I can before I die. My sons will continue to do the same

– and their sons after them. Someday we will have the largest farm on the island – and they did. Chang said, “The mountain cannot grow – but we can.”

Many of the problems we face cannot be eliminated instantly – but can be addressed and moved one piece – one day – at a time. Paul knew the teaching of Jesus “So do not be anxious about tomorrow – tomorrow will be anxious for itself.”

Paul faced the mountain of his trial before the Roman magistrate. The might and power of the Roman Empire was behind the judge. He could have thrown up his hands in despair and just quit. However, he used his time not in worry – but in preparing for his defense. He is further concerned about the churches under his care and how they might react. He wanted the work of the gospel to go on. So in **verse 4**, Paul shares, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again. Rejoice.”

Paul, I believe is playing the role much like that of a modern cheerleader or encourager. I can see Paul now saying, “Give me a ‘J’. Give me an ‘O’. Give me a ‘Y’,” and then shouting, “What’s that spell?” The Philippians would respond, “**JOY!**” Here the keynote message of the letter is sounded once again.

So in that spirit, I want to share 3 points for your consideration today.

FIRST PAUL RE-FOCUSED HIS LIFE ON CHRIST – AND NOT THE CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING HIM.

The circumstances of life had dealt a harsh blow to Paul Wittgenstein, who was a distinguished concert pianist. He lost his entire right arm. However, Paul Wittgenstein, in the midst of this very difficult and challenging circumstance, refused to quit. He went to some of his composer colleagues and requested they write musical compositions for the left hand only. Some were excited about it. They did exactly that. You may be familiar with Maurice Ravel’s “**Piano Concerto in D for the Left Hand.**” That was written for Paul Wittgenstein. He went on to have another brilliant concert career, playing with only one hand. Paul Wittgenstein’s secret, much like the Apostle Paul’s, was to focus on what he had to work with, not to complain about what he did not have. When you have a refuge from the storm, you can begin to focus and utilize your gifts for something else besides the storm.¹ I prefer one thing to be done rather than to talk about 7 things that never happen.

Now Paul is telling the Philippians to hang in there – do not quit. Let your gentleness be evident to all. Others might be looking at you to see how a believer responds in this circumstance.

God will give us the strength we need to face today. When Hurricane Katrina hit, some interesting stories survived. Some workers found a live bird with his claws stuck in a log. On the side where the wind blew, all his feathers were gone – blown away by the wind. But he held on and lived through it. The workers dug out his claws and set

him free – a champion, a testimony to the power of God. Don't you believe that if God did that for a bird, He'll do it for you?

SECONDLY, THE VALUE OF A GREAT PERSPECTIVE ON LIFE CAN NEVER BE OVERSTATED.

I once heard the story of an old Navajo Indian in Arizona who became a very wealthy man when oil was discovered on his land. But wealth did not change him.

He went on living just as he had before while the money piled up in the bank. Every now and then, however, the old man would visit the bank and say to the banker, "Crops all dried up; sheep all dead; cattle all stolen." The banker knew exactly what to do. He would take the old man into the vault, seat him at a table, and place several bags of silver dollars in front of him for him to count. After a while the man would come out and say, "Crops fine; sheep all alive; cattle all back." Why the change? He had simply reviewed his resources and reminded himself of what he had to fall back on.

This is what believers must do when the pressure comes. When we feel like complaining and murmuring, let us remember who we are in Him and what He has promised us for times of stress.²

In my first parish – I had a member who owned a beautiful and very expensive antique car. He never drove it – always afraid it would be scratched or stolen. Don't use your faith in such a way. Invest it in the plans and purposes of God. A faith that only works on Sunday morning has very limited value to you and anyone else.

Now we turn to **verse 6**: "Be anxious for nothing but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your request be made known to God."

I have bad news and good news for those of us here today who are 'compulsive worry warts.' The bad news is as follows: There is more to worry about than ever before. We live in a time of great turmoil and insecurity.

The National Anxiety Center recently released its list of "100 things to worry about in the 21st century." It included everything from AIDS to zits, from drugs to split ends.

The good news is that Jesus is still on the throne and invites us to cast all our anxieties, worries and cares upon him.

One of the principles taught by the late Dr. Norman Vincent Peale is that worrying becomes, for many, an unhealthy habit. They practice it for so long it becomes a pattern for living – a mind set. Worry, then, becomes interest paid on the debt of trouble before it is due. This is why Dr. Peale believes it has no place in the Christian life, because it ignores the resources that our faith in Christ can give us to live.

Dr. Charles Mayo, of the famed Mayo Clinic, says, “Worry affects the circulation, the heart, the glands, the whole nervous system, and it profoundly affects the health of us all.” He continues by sharing, “I very rarely met anybody who died from overwork, but I have known many people who have died from worry.”

So Paul put his hands to the plow and did part – then folded those hands in prayer and let God do his part.

LASTLY, LEAN BACK AND REST ON THE EVERLASTING ARMS OF GOD.

The writer George MacDonald, who had a profound influence on C. S. Lewis, often said, “No man/woman ever sank under the burden of the day. It is when tomorrow’s burden is added to the burden of today that the weight is more than a person can handle.” Jesus taught us to pace ourselves. The best thing about life is that we receive it one day at a time and we live in the day called TODAY, not YESTERDAY and not TOMORROW. But, in our divided minds, we don’t really live in today. Sixty percent of our worries concern the future – what might happen. Thirty percent concerns yesterday – what has happened. And only ten percent deals with the concerns of today. Jesus says that’s too great a load. He said, “One day’s troubles are enough for one day.”

I recently wrote an encouraging note to a dear sister in Christ who is undergoing radiation treatments for 6 weeks 5 days a week. I told her to “keep ‘whistling in the dark’ because we serve an awesome God who is sovereign in all circumstances of life.”

Among the Sioux Indians in South Dakota – there is a tradition that the young men carry on even to this day. Every young adult male looks forward to the day he would be acknowledged as a brave – courageous adult member of the tribe. Toward sunset – the father and son would share a meal by the campfire – and as the darkness fell – the father would say farewell and leave the boy to spend the night alone. There is something about the night and darkness that escalates the power of fear and anxiety.

How long and frightening the night must have seemed to the young warrior. However, when the night gave way to the brightening rays of the sun – the young warrior had discovered that the father had shared the vigil and kept watch all through the night. Yes, **Psalm 121** reminds us “He who watches over you will not slumber. Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.” That is why we keep ‘whistling in the dark.’

My friend recently contacted me and said, “She is simply lifted by the prayers and notes she has received.” This illness is part of the great adventure and journey of her life. This perspective keeps her running the good race.

Yes, “driven to the end of our own resources we find that the world can look and sound very much like an enemy ‘out to get us.’ The same experience can also drive us to a deeper trust in God, whereby we can say, ‘My times are in your hand.’ We go from worrying about ‘human plots’ – to being secure in the ‘shelter of his tabernacle.’”³

Notice in **verse 7** Paul shares, “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” The perspective and resources with which we view our burdens and fears will determine the condition and response of our hearts. We find peace of mind not by cowering away from all the pressures of life, not by taking more stimulants or depressants, not even by looking for peace itself. It is our perspective that matters. We find peace of mind and heart only when we wrap ourselves up in something bigger than ourselves.

Today, we started our sermon with the story of a man who was given advice to discontinue his work in life because the mountains were seemingly too large to conquer. Another continued his quest to be a great musician and pianist with only one hand. Both individuals could have been anxious, fearful and disillusioned with life. However, they pressed on – handling each day and event with the power and purpose of God. That same choice is ours.

There are times when I read and study and reflect on this letter to the Philippians – and I am convinced that Paul wrote it just for me. What? Me worry? So, as we prepare for retirement – I am going to employ the same strategy that I used when I entered into the ministry. If God makes a promise to meet our needs – we don’t have to be anxious or worry. We have a part to play and a response to make, but – if God assumes responsibility – we don’t have to carry the burden.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
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ENDNOTES

¹ Jac J. Muller, **THE EPISTLE OF PAUL TO THE PHILIPPIANS**, (William B. Eerdman’s Publishing Co., 1955, page 140).

² Ray C. Stedman, **WAITING FOR THE SECOND COMING**, Discovery House Publishers, 1990, pages 138-157.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, **PRAYING WITH THE PSALMS**, Harper: San Francisco, 1993, February 27th devotional.