

## In God's Hands

Matthew 6:25-34

November 26, 2023

For the last year I have seen an acupuncturist, and a few days before this week's holiday, she offered at the end of my appointment to give me an ear seed—a small seed that she tapes here in my ear. And she instructed me to squeeze it anytime I had trouble falling asleep, got a headache, or the uncle decided to talk politics while carving the turkey. I think she knew what Jesus had said: "Today's trouble is enough for today."

Worry. It's the topic for this section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and I suspect it's something you're familiar with. Whether you spent the week worrying if the turkey would turn out, if a visitor would interrupt the loneliness, if the grandchildren would be alright, if the bills would get paid, if the grief would cease just long enough to release its grip and you could glimpse joy, if a ceasefire would help, if evil itself would cease, if the family would welcome you home this time... worry. It's the guest at the table that no one invited, and yet everyone knows its unique name.

We are coming up on the time of the year when Google will tell us what we worry-searched in the middle of the night, or rather what we researched, in 2023. And dictionaries will soon select their words of the year. In 2022, that word selected by Collins Dictionary was *permacrisis*, defined as "an extended period of instability and insecurity, especially one resulting from a series of catastrophic events."

Worry. I can squeeze my ear all I want, but it seems to be definitionally here to stay.

And when Jesus witnessed the worriers of his day—worrying in their case about keeping up appearances, checking religious boxes, and measuring up to those

who had appointed themselves judge and jury over their lives—Jesus offers a gracious invitation. "Do not worry about what you will eat or what you will wear or about your body."

This is not a scolding to cease nail biting; it is a salve for a people possessed by their possessions, weary with worry, and making their mission for a good life master of their souls.

"Do not worry," he says to them with tenderness.

Please know that Jesus is not suggesting to those without food nor clothing that they need to cease their whining. Yes, Jesus regularly fed the hungry, healed the sick, tended to the grieving, and insisted on clothing the naked. And he expects us—his disciples—to go and do likewise. In fact, that's precisely why he is instructing us not to worry. For when we are fixated on our fortunes, we cease to see the ones whom Jesus wants us to serve.

And Jesus began this very sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, with a series of blessings known as the Beatitudes. They're spoken over those who feel far from blessed. The meek, the mourning, the poor, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. Perhaps you can find yourself on that list this morning, and Jesus wants to bless you.

When I was living in Louisville, KY, and a part of Second Presbyterian Church there (I have a pattern), our young adult small group at the time had a running joke. Each time life seemed to be closer to the valley than the mountain top, we would say, "Bless up." We never explicitly defined it. It doesn't make much sense, but it came to be a sort of collective

acknowledgment that Jesus' blessing did not come with material comforts nor spare us suffering. As someone shared their grief, between the tears they'd often take a pause to say, "Well, bless up." And then the pressure valve was almost released, and the group would laugh through our tears. And when Christian (my husband) and I moved away, we received a sign imprinted with the phrase, and the group handed it to us at our departure and said, "We didn't want this, but bless up."

There are many who claim to want to bless us. The political zealot, the black Friday salesperson, the televangelist. Oh, how they want to bless us, and somehow, we always end up stuck with the bill. Perhaps like the scribes of Jesus' day, they tell us that if we hold fast enough to holiness and muscle our way to moral purity, blessings will flow down. Some sell us the story of meritocracy: that the talented and the able will be blessed. And then there is the scourge of scarcity that tells us any blessings we obtain we must hoard, or we will not have enough for tomorrow.

So, what is Jesus talking about? What kind of blessing did Jesus begin this sermon with? And then what did Jesus mean when he said all these things shall be given unto you?

Surely all these things are not bought for three easy payments of \$44.95, nor will the blessing be for one nuclear family alone to be saved in the rainy-day account, nor is it a path to power for a few and peril for all the rest. We can be confident that this is not that kind of invitation because Jesus, when the crowds discover he is not their cosmic bell hop waiting upon their every personal concern, the crowds will betray Jesus to his cross.

This blessing is bigger than me or you. This assurance that we need not worry *for all things will be given unto us* is not about material gain. It is a call to mission—a mission that does not disregard the permacrisis but propels us right into it with the partnership of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit sustaining us every step of the way.

This is the Sunday each year that we celebrate Reign of Christ. We mark the end of the Christian calendar before we turn our attention to Advent and a fresh beginning. Here, as if standing on tiptoe to peer into the manger, we find our balance by looking up and seeing that it is Jesus, the one who cares about our worries, who cared enough to live among us, to bless us with the abandon of a child who has just found a pile of confetti, tossing it around for all, and to teach us—stubborn us—how to live God's love. He climbed upon that cross because the bounds of his blessing would not shy away from death and suffering, and then he rose from the dead so no matter what crises we may face, we never face them apart from Christ's power. For he reigns over all creation. The world is held in Christ's hands.

And he tells us, "Blessed are you. Do not worry. Seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness."

His hands have been pierced, and now they hold together the whole world. What brokenness then can he not hold? What worries can he not bear for you? And what has our worry gained us? What paths has it led us down only to leave us there? Or better yet, what has it cost us to believe some influencer on the internet or fad solution or false god cares enough to bless our brokenness and hold our shattered lives whole?

The gracious invitation has been extended. Do not worry. Seek first the Kingdom of God.

And this very hour the question is being asked of us: into whose hands will we entrust our lives?

In a recent gathering of college-age students, I prompted the group to select a story from scripture where God was calling or instructing someone in a way that resonated with their own lives right now. They searched the sacred stories and came back with unique and profound reflections. When sharing their thoughts about one passage, a young woman said: "It strikes me as very easy to claim God gives us power to act in

our own self-interest, but it's another thing to daily live a self-sacrificial faith."

*It's very easy to claim God gives us power to act in our own self-interest, but it's another thing to daily live a self-sacrificial faith.*

As she shared, we were far from Matthew—in the prophets of the Old Testament—but in her words the tension emerged between a hollow religion that seeks material gain and a faith that leaps far enough to feel stretched.

We believe that while demagogues may rise up and demand our allegiance, our resources, our energy, that the truth of Jesus Christ will show a watching world how false, fear-inducing, and fickle those gods really are. And each time that young woman or any among us choose to live a daily, self-sacrificial faith, we witness to what happens when we entrust our lives back into the hands of a loving God.

She went on to articulate that being known and loved by God is good, but ultimately that security is for the purpose of leading her to act in the interest of others.

The poet Mary Oliver wrote once about what is possible when we put our worries down. She wrote these words:

I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the rivers flow in the right direction, will the earth turn as it was taught, and if not how shall I correct it?  
 Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven, can I do better?  
 Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrows can do it and I am, well, hopeless.  
 Is my eyesight fading or am I just imagining it, am I going to get rheumatism, lockjaw, dementia?  
 Finally, I saw that worrying had come to nothing. And gave it up. And took my old body and went out into the morning, and sang.

Like Mary Oliver singing or the college student serving, we release our very real worries into God's hands when we recognize there is something bigger we could be doing with these lives than worrying. When we, on tiptoe, see Christ calling us out of the boat, into the world, across the street to serve another. When we entrust our worries and our lives into the hands of a loving God, our burdens are lifted, our vision is broadened, and we can see now who this blessing is for—it's for all the world. The world God so loves. The world God is calling us to participate in blessing.

When Jesus says, "Do not worry," this is not a call to careless living but a call to direct all of our cares toward the mission of Jesus Christ. Once we have decided to entrust our lives back into the hands of God, we are freed up to get back to work.

This past July a group of 35 or so people gathered for Grown-up Summer Camp. It was an opportunity for adults to get away for a weekend to pray, play, and be with God together. At least for a few days, we set down our worries. We had the honor of being led throughout the weekend in worship by Rev. Dr. Winterbourne Harrison Jones, the pastor of Witherspoon Presbyterian Church here in Indianapolis. I so hope that Winterbourne and Witherspoon are becoming familiar names to you as our friendship grows. Perhaps through his preaching or through a podcast, you have gotten to hear his powerful witness. Well, Winterbourne spent the weekend asking us a series of questions, and he began the weekend with this one: Why are you here?

*Why are you here?*

I have heard people give the instruction to keep a worry journal—a record of what populates our thoughts and where our energy drifts throughout the day—for this is perhaps where our treasure lies. But today I think we'd be better served by taking note that we are here. Perhaps because a family member twisted your arm or duty or habit or the holiday spirit.

Or perhaps you are here because for just a moment, you want to lift your eyes above the ticker tape of worry. Perhaps because you want to set it down and sing. Perhaps because you are homesick for a place you do not yet know but where Jesus seems to be nudging you to go. Perhaps because by some cosmic design the One who has created you has carried you here today.

You are here. So, what if you entrusted your life—your future, your work, your energy, your love—back into the hands of your maker?

What a blessing that would be.

Amen.