

19th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
October 11, 2020

Text: Philippians 4:1-9

Theme: Do Not Worry

Do not worry about anything . . . but in everything (by prayer and supplication) (with thanksgiving) let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God (which surpasses all understanding) will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen

Five hundred years ago a well-known French philosopher, Michel de Montaigne once said: *My life has been filled with terrible misfortune; most of which never happened.* A recent study proved his point. In the study people were asked to write down all of their concerns and to do so over an extended period of time. And then later on they were to identify which of their anticipated misfortunes actually happened. 85% of what people worried about never came to fruition. With the 15% that did happen, 79% discovered either they could handle the difficulty better than expected or the difficulty taught them a valuable lesson. As a former mathematician that translates into 97% of what the people were worried about (in this study) either bore no fruit or it was not as bad as people anticipated.

Statistics aside it seems that our ability to worry is part of our DNA. Most of us would agree that our concerns are legitimate. At the end of last year the national list of worries included health care, climate change, mass shootings, and the uncertainties in our world. In 2020 we can now include our concerns over the spread of the virus, how soon a vaccine will become available that is considered safe, and also the issues surrounding the upcoming presidential election. Bear with me as I also include our personal worries, such as our own health or the health of our loved ones, job security, and our financial future.

I think it is safe to say that each week we carry the worries of today into this worship space. And then we hear these words . . . Do not worry about anything but in everything (by prayer and supplication) (with thanksgiving) let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God (which surpasses all understanding) will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

We know that when we worry it causes us to be stressed and stress causes serious health and emotional problems. Worry challenges our faith. If we could just get a handle on the worry that habitually, persistently, and often unconsciously seizes us then we could greatly increase our odds of living a longer and happier life. But how do we rewire our brains to stop worrying? It is not an easy question to answer but let me try (smile).

In Matthew 6 it is Jesus himself who tells us not to worry about our life or what we will eat or what we will drink or what we will wear. And then he offers concrete examples of how God cares for the birds of the air and tends to the lilies of the field. He concludes with this:
Are you not of more value than they?
And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

The answer to the first question is *yes*.

The answer to the second question is *no*.

So we are not to worry. Jesus assures us that God will take good care of us. And it is in Philippians that we are given the prescription we need to eliminate worry from our lives so that we can see more clearly God at work. Some translations read that we are not to be anxious about anything but in the Greek there is a slight nuance that makes it a bit more forceful. It is more accurate to say we are to stop worrying about anything altogether. Just stop! When we fill ourselves with the cares of the world (especially as it pertains to the future) then we become distracted. And the last thing we need is more distractions! Whatever the circumstances that have given rise to our anxiety we are now urged to turn off our brains from going down those paths that lead us into a dark tunnel. And Paul is clear that there are to be no exceptions.

Remember from last week that Paul gives this exhortation when he is in his own precarious situation. He sits in a prison cell unsure of his future. But if he worried about what might come next then it would only distract him from the bigger picture. It is the reason he calls on us to stand firm in the Lord. We are to remain steadfast. We do not have to worry about anything because God will stand with us. God may or may not remove us from our situation but God will help us get through it. In the end we will find joy. In the end we will be crowned in his glory.

It takes practice to stay focused on Christ all the time but then Paul offers us a most excellent way to do this. He encourages us in every situation to make our requests known to God by supplications and prayers. It sounds so easy. We just need to pray.

On Tuesday mornings a small group of us have been meeting since September to talk about prayer. We will spend about nine months discussing this one topic because we want to know the right way to pray. Our resource is entitled *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* by Philip Yancey. We are learning that most of us approach prayer as an opportunity to ask God for something or (in the words of the author) to tell God what to do. We pray for forgiveness and we pray that we are not alone in our suffering.

But if we understand prayer to be our point of contact with God then we understand the urgency of this message from Paul. The way to stop worrying about anything is to be prayerful in everything (in all things) (in all situations).

In prayer we are to present to God our true selves. We heard in Matthew 6 that God already cares about our concerns. So we start our prayers by acknowledging the nature of our relationship with God. In the Lord's Prayer we say – *Our Father*. In those two words alone we remember who we are and who God is to us. It reminds us that we are human and God is God. And from that perspective we can then make ourselves vulnerable before God because God wants to hear our doubts and our complaints and our worries. God wants us to talk to him about everything because God knows it will deepen our trust in him. (Think about it) out of all that God has created we are the only ones who can hold such an intimate conversation with God.

When our requests are made known to God in prayer then they are to be accompanied with thanksgiving. We are to remember the mighty works of God in Christ. We are to remember all the different ways that his grace is poured out upon us. The giving of thanks is also to be offered under all circumstances for it is the appropriate response for those who are filled with the Holy Spirit. We are to be thankful for the good things we have already received especially his gracious gift of salvation in Christ (and the precious gift of his gospel).

By offering our prayers with a thankful heart we will show that we are prepared to surrender ourselves to the will of God whatever our circumstances.

At the end of the day when we let our requests be made known to God (whether our petitions are granted or not) we will know peace. It is a peace more wonderful than we can imagine. It is a peace that will guard us so that we can stand firm in the Lord. It is a peace that will be powerfully at work in our lives as a result of our willingness to pour out our hearts in prayer and with thanksgiving.

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