People love it when I preach about worry. It’s not because I am particularly insightful about this subject. It’s because everyone worries. I haven’t met a person yet who doesn’t worry about something. Some of us let our worries show. Others do all their worrying on the inside.

I thought all week about what Jesus said about worry. Then what did I do last night when I went to bed? I worried about my sermon on worry! I worried about whether it would connect with you today. I worried about whether students would find it as boring as I remembered sermons as a child. I worried about whether it is faithful to what Jesus taught. I worried about whether what I planned is what God wants me to say.

I worry about the church, this church and every church. I worry about whether they will stay true to our mission. I worry about whether the church will capitulate to culture’s secular assumptions. I worry whether the church will have the tenacity to become counter-cultural in our day.

I worry about America. I am anxious that we’re losing our way. We seem so taken with tolerance and inclusivity that nothing else matters. Don’t get me wrong, tolerance is most assuredly a Christian virtue, but there other things beside tolerance.

As I prepared for this sermon, two flashbacks came into view. I thought about Bobby McFerrin’s song, Don’t Worry, Be Happy. Some of you will remember Bob Marley’s remake of it years back. This song made Rolling Stone’s list of the top 15 best whistling songs of all time. It’s a classic tune, but the words are a little lame. There’s got to be a better antidote to worry than “be happy.”

My other flashback is reading MAD magazine in my youth. I can vividly recall Alfred E. Neuman’s goofy expression and his “What, Me Worry” approach to life. It brought a smile to my face, but it didn’t help me one little bit in preparing this sermon.

No, only Jesus can save us from our worry.

Jesus begins this portion of his sermon with the words, “Do not worry about your life” (12:22). He asks two questions in the middle section: “Which of you by worrying can add an hour to your life?” (12:25) and “Why do you worry?” (12:26). Then he concludes with the words, “Do not worry about
“Worry is like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do, but it doesn’t get you anywhere.”

What you eat and drink” (12:29).

There’s nothing wrong with showing appropriate concern for staples like food and clothing. Worry is something else entirely. Worry gives inordinate, excessive attention to fashion and fine dining. That’s why Jesus says, in verse 23, “Life is more than food and the body more than clothing.”

Jesus directs his listeners, in verse 24, to “Consider the ravens.” Not the Baltimore Ravens, but the family of birds known as ravens! They’re remarkably versatile, as evidenced by their survival skills over thousands of years. American crows descend from ravens. You may regard them as pests with their scavenger dispositions and high-pitched caw sounds. Actually, they’re quite intelligent. They can mimic other bird calls and even the human voice.

Birds don’t worry. They go about their business of gathering food and building nests, unconsciously fulfilling the purposes God has for them. “How much more valuable are you than the birds!” Jesus says. Ravens were regarded as unclean animals in the Old Testament (Leviticus 11:15). If unclean animals are cared for by God, how much more does God care about you, who are fashioned in His image?

Jesus asks, “Which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?” Could Jesus be asking this question tongue-in-cheek? Worry doesn’t lengthen life. Quite the contrary, worry shortens life. Worry generates all sorts of health issues: high blood pressure, ulcers, heart ailments and a host of stomach ailments.

I came across a great proverb this week: “Worry is like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do, but it doesn’t get you anywhere.”

Jesus delivers this sermon in an open-air sanctuary, so I imagine him employing sweeping hand gestures as he points to the lilies on the Galilean hillside when he directs them to “Consider the lilies,” in verse 27.

Flowers don’t worry about growing. They just grow. Instinctively, they draw food and nutrients from the soil. Jesus drives his point home: “Even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these [flowers]” (11:19). While Solomon may be able to dress up in royal spender, only God can make a flower.

This is the second time Jesus employs this second how-much-more comparison. “If God so clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and gone tomorrow, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith” (11:28).

Let the birds and flowers become our teachers. If God cares for birds and flowers, how much more will God care for us? God knows what we need. God will provide for us in His time and in His way.
“Do not keep striving for what you will eat and drink,” Jesus announces, in verse 29: “Instead, strive for the kingdom of God” (11:31). Don’t merely seek material pleasure. Seek the kingdom and all these other things that worry us so will be ours, also.

The last three verses are each delivered in quick, staccato fashion. Jesus’ words, in verse 32, “Do not be afraid,” is a familiar refrain. When he invites people to be his disciples, he says, “Do not be afraid” (5:10). When he was walking on the water in a storm, he tells his disciples, “Don’t be afraid” (6:50). When they are terrified at his resurrection from death to life again, he announces, “Do not be afraid” (Matthew 28:10). The phrase “do not fear” appears 365 times in Scripture, one for each day of the year.

Doubt is not fear’s opposite. The antonym of faith is fear. Fear is what immobilizes faith.

Jesus tells people, in verse 33, “Sell your possessions and give alms.” Now, to be fair, he doesn’t tell everyone to sell their belongings, but he says it here. I suspect he says it because Jesus knows how often possessions possess us. One way to lessen their importance is to give them away.

Jesus closes his sermon with the words, “Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also” (12:34). You see, at the root of his treasure statement is our heart’s desire. If we seek God’s kingdom, our material worries will reduce in size.

Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert opens his best-selling book, Stumbling on Happiness, with what he calls “The Sentence.” He begins “The Sentence” with the words, “The human is the only animal that…. Gilbert finishes the sentence this way, “The human being is the only animal that thinks about the future.” He estimates the average adult spends 12 percent of the day thinking about tomorrow. That’s roughly one out of every eight hours thinking about the future. This is where we get into trouble. We become caught in a hamster wheel of anxiety, worrying about the future. What can we do? Let me offer a few suggestions for your consideration.

First, ask whether there is something you can do to isolate worry? Otherwise, worry will infiltrate every area of your life. It can create all sorts of vague fears. Worry begins like a small stream but can become a mighty river if you’re not attentive.

Second, assess whether or not your worry is productive. Ask whether there is something you can do with this anxiety? If you’re anxious about money, see a financial consultant. If you’re anxious about your health, see a doctor.

Third, make a conscious effort to relinquish your worries to God through prayer. Paul writes to the Philippians, “Do
Jesus wants to save your real life; not only your religious life, but your real life.

not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (4:6). Center your day in prayer. Offer flash prayers through the day when you sense worry seeping back into your life. Carry a verse with you into your day that helps ward off worry. I commend one I’ve been using lately, “Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the Lord has been good to you” (Psalm 116:7).

I’m reminded of an old fable about a woman walking down the road with a heavy burden on her shoulders. A man with a horse and wagon stops to offer her a ride. She climbs into the back of the wagon but continues to hold the heavy load on her shoulders. The man asks why she doesn’t lay her burden down in the wagon. She answers that she doesn’t want to burden the horse any more than it’s already burdened. The burden is the same to the horse, whether she keeps the burden on her shoulders or puts it in the wagon. Some of us are carrying heavy burdens. We don’t have to carry these burdens around with us. We can lay them down.

Jesus wants to save your real life; not only your religious life, but your real life. Eugene Peterson makes a telling observation about his time as a parish pastor. He noticed that people in his church left 50 percent of their vocabulary outside. They stiffened ever so slightly in church. They brought their religious selves to worship; their sanitized, cleaned up version of themselves. But they left family feuds, hurt feelings and bitter arguments parked outside the church doors.

Today, as we come to the Lord’s Supper, I invite you to bring your real self to Jesus. Not your religious self, but your true self. Where, in your real life, are you weighed down with worry? What is making you anxious? As we receive the bread and the cup, offer your worries to Jesus. Lay your burdens down.