

Going Deeper: Therefore I Tell You, Do Not Worry

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

February 7, 2021-AM Service

Reverend Peter Jonker

Matthew 6:25-34

“Do not worry,” says Jesus. Let’s talk about worry. If you talk to counselors and teachers who work with young people, they will tell you that worry is on the rise. More and more kids-high school students and college students and younger are dealing with anxiety. Jean Twenge is one of many who have documented this trend. In her book *Igen*, she says that between 2012 and 2015, depression in high school boys increased 21%, and depression in high school girls increased a whopping 51%. In 2017 the New York Times published a really interesting feature article on the prevalence of anxiety among young people. That article told the stories of some children who struggled with anxiety. Students like Jake. Jake had been a hyper-achieving student. He was taking three advance placement classes. He ran on the school’s cross country team. He participated in the model United Nations. He did very well in all his classes. Smart and active, he seemed destined for great things, but then suddenly he slammed into a wall of anxiety that left him curled up on the floor, unable to function.

Jake’s story is increasingly common among young people. Even children who come from privileged backgrounds find themselves overwhelmed with worries. The Times article quotes Suniya Luthar, a professor of psychology at Arizona State University. She says this about anxiety among upper middle class young people. “*These kids are incredibly anxious and perfectionistic,*” she says. For many of these young people, the biggest single stressor is that they “*never get to the point where they can say, ‘I’ve done enough, and now I can stop,’*” Luthar says. “*There’s always one more activity, one more A.P. class, one more thing to do in order to get into a top college. Kids have a sense that they’re not measuring up. The pressure is relentless and getting worse.*” And that’s the kids with means. Imagine the struggle of the young people from more disadvantaged situations. And all that was before the pandemic. Imagine what this past year has done to anxiety levels. Worry is everywhere. It is a modern malaise and it is growing.

The people to whom Jesus was speaking would have their fair share of worry. Do you remember who’s in the congregation? Chapter 4 tells us that most of the people who were there that day were people who had come for healing. Jesus would have been speaking to the lame and the blind, the harassed and helpless. Jesus’ congregation would have been full of anxious, worried people. And Jesus says to them (and Jesus says to us), “*Do not worry! Who by worrying can add even a single hour to your life? Each day has enough trouble of its own! The God who clothes the lily and feeds the sparrow will cloth and feed you. So don’t worry!*” Now when Jesus says this, let me admit there’s a part of me that wants to stand up and interrupt him. Something you should never do in a sermon. But part of me wants to stand up and say, “But wait Jesus! How does that work! How do I just stop worrying!?”

“First of all, isn’t telling someone to stop worrying a little like telling people “Hey everyone, whatever you do, don’t think about the pink elephant. The worst thing you could possibly do is think about pink elephants.” What happens? People’s minds are full of pink elephants, dancing around. “Jesus, you tell me to stop worrying, and now, in addition to all my other worries, I’m worried about worrying too much!” “And second of all, Jesus, do you really want us to stop worrying! Would it really be good if everyone stopped worrying? What if I

stopped worrying about my sermon? I didn't spend time studying during the week. I didn't bother to write anything down, but just got up here and started saying whatever came to mind? How would that go?" Should high school students stop worrying about their exams? Should they stop studying and just show up to see if they remember or not? "*And, Jesus, there are things going on!* Jesus, I have a child who comes home crying from school every day. Jesus, I have a marriage that's falling apart. Jesus, Someone I love is an addict and it's destroying my family. My business is on the verge of collapse. My family barely speaks because of differences over politics and Covid. My daughter told me she doesn't believe in God anymore. My sister is dying of cancer. And you want me to stop worrying? Jesus I love you, all my hope is in you, but how exactly is that supposed to work?"

Worry is part of the landscape of all our lives. So let us go deeper in thinking about worry. What is Jesus telling us about worry? If we listen carefully, we will hear Jesus is pushing us deeper. Jesus is pushing us down below the surface of our worry to its roots. Jesus is pushing us to look at the assumptions we carry in our hearts that become the source of our worries. What assumptions are those?

I talked earlier about how modern young people in America are the most anxious generation in recent memory. They are generation worry. Here's another thing that's true, although I admit I don't have a nice data point to prove it, I feel pretty confident in saying that this is also the most *worried about* generation in recent memory. Modern parents spend all sorts of energy worrying about their children and that worry energy pours out in a mighty stream into the lives of children. It's not just parents, all institutions that train or care for kids shower them with worry. These children are the most tested generation in history. In the educational realm, we are constantly measuring and evaluating a child's performance, making sure that they are tracking, making interventions if they're not. In the medical realm, our children are the most tested in memory, we are constantly measuring them, evaluating them, making sure they are tracking, and intervening if they are not. Every childhood experience is evaluated and measured to see if it contributes to the long-term flourishing of our child. Music, sports, inter-cultural experiences, play, sleep, diet...we are measuring all of these things for our children. And then there are all the safety devices that we wrap them in to keep these loved ones safe and sound and happy and presumably worry free. Helmets, monitors, booster seats...*Never* have we worked so hard to keep the next generation safe and guard them from any trouble or discomfort.

But here's the problem: *what's the body language of all that protection?* What's the body language of all that achievement testing? It's good stuff. I'm not speaking against testing and safety for our children, but if you're a child and everyone is constantly talking to you about safety and testing you for achievement, what message are you getting? Two things I think. 1. The world is a fundamentally dangerous place, so watch out. Lock your doors. Put on your helmet. Don't talk to strangers and maybe get a gun. 2. It's up to you to make it in this world. When we keep measuring our children, we tell them, '*you have got to measure up!*' *Hey kids, starting now, you better achieve. You better stay on the right side of the data, because if you are on the wrong side, you will lose and this world will chew you up and spit you out.*' Of course that's not what we're trying to tell our children when we fixate on testing, but that's the body language. No wonder they're so worried. Anxiety and depression are complex phenomena. There is a biological/chemical side to this. But there's a nurture side to this too. If our children keep getting the message: "*the world is dangerous, dangerous, dangerous! You've got to succeed! You've got to achieve! You've got to measure up!!*" they will worry.

It's that deep foundational assumptions that Jesus is fighting in our passage. Caring for people, concern about getting a decent grade on a test, wondering if your aging parents are doing okay during Covid, that's not the kind of worry Jesus is talking about. Jesus is talking about a kind of worry that comes from those two deep assumptions. 1. The world is an uncaring stormy sea, and 2. If you're going to make it, baby, you better be a good swimmer. When you think the world is basically harsh, and success is up to you, worry will be a frantic voice at the center of your heart that never stops speaking. "Do not worry," says Jesus, and it's that deep worry that he's talking about. We can say that because he gives us two practical ways to fight worry and both of those speak against those two beliefs that ground deep worry.

Jesus speaks against that first-deep assumption when he says, "*consider the lilies.*" "*Look at how God clothes the lilies and how he feeds the sparrows.*" When Jesus says that, he's challenging the notion that the world is fundamentally cruel. "This world is not cruel; it is the handiwork of a loving God. That loving God is busy clothing lilies and feeding sparrows. He softens the earth with rain, and blesses it with sunshine. He makes the seasons move in fruitful order. He makes beauty play in 10,000 places and every one of those places is God saying, "*I'm here! I love you!*" And besides, you are not lilies of the field or birds of the air; you are beloved children in his family. Yes, bad things happen in this world, but watch God's care for creation and you will know that love and abundance is at the center."

Victor Frankl was a psychotherapist who was imprisoned by the Nazis in a WWII camp, but who survived to tell his story. He remembered one afternoon the men of the camp had been forced on a long march back from their worksites to the barracks. It was raining and miserable and gray, and the men were sick and hungry and emaciated. These men had every reason to think the world was fundamentally cruel and to worry about their life. They got back to barracks and were just lying down to rest when another prisoner burst inside and said, "Quick everyone, come out and see!" The exhausted prisoners staggered out into the courtyard, and the sun had managed to break through the rain and the clouds and it was reflecting beautifully off the pools of water standing in the concrete courtyard of the camp. "*We stood there,*" said Frankl, "*marveling at the goodness of the creation. We were tired and cold and sick, we were starving to death, we had lost our loved ones and never expected to see them again, yet there we stood, feeling a sense of reverence as old and formidable as the world itself!*" That display of beauty didn't stop these men from worrying about their life, but it did help them keep worry from being their foundation. So, consider the lilies.

Jesus challenges the second-deep assumption of worry (that it's all up to us) when he says, "*Don't worry saying what shall we eat or what shall we wear; seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well. Seek first his kingdom.*" When you first hear that, you might get the impression that this kingdom thing is up to you. The kingdom of God and his righteousness is like this mountain of righteousness. And you seek it and you climb it, and, if you are faithful, you make it and then you get your eternal reward. So it's still up to you. But is that the kingdom of God? Is that the righteousness that God reveals in Christ? When we seek the righteousness of God, what do we find? Paul tells us in Romans 1:17 "For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last." We do not find this righteousness, it finds us. When we come to faith, it's not some sort of achievement, it's a realization that we are already surrounded by the enormous love of God that is ours through Jesus Christ. To seek first, the kingdom, is to realize that it's not up to you and your achievement. To seek first, the kingdom, is to realize that you are saved by grace through faith, not by works, so that no one can boast. To seek first, the kingdom, is to

realize that you don't gain a place in God's family because of your SAT score, or because of your 40-yard dash time or because of the number of Instagram followers you have, you are righteous because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ your Lord.

Of course, when we follow Jesus we seek Christ's righteousness with all the human power we have, *but our seeking is not the power here*. Let me ask you this, how many of the 12 disciples found their way into Jesus inner circle because they were seeking him? None of them. Zero. They were all called. They were all yanked out of their old life into the kingdom. They didn't find the kingdom, the kingdom found them. And what about Abel James Hekstra? Has he been seeking the kingdom; has he been looking for the kingdom of God? No. But here today God's kingdom and his righteousness have found him and he is a part of God's family. As he grows he will seek the Lord, but the God he finds will have been with him all along. All his seeking will bring him back to this font, and this water, and these promises and this God who loves him.

As they grow up, as they watch us, as they listen to us, as they watch how we live and how we speak, may our children hear us say with our mouths and hear us say with our lives: *"The world is good and God is working in it for good."* *"Despite all the trouble in this world God loves us and he is working for our good."* Because when the Spirit puts those two facts at the center of our heart and mind, when the love of this God overwhelms you, whatever anxiety or worry you might feel in the moment, joy will be your story.

© Rev. Peter Jonker