

What to Do with Worries
Matthew 6:25–34; Philippians 4:4–9; Romans 8:26–28, 31–39
Sunday, July 14, 2024

Let us pray: Lord, shine the light of your Word upon us. Illuminate our paths, so that we can see where you are calling us to go, what you are calling us to do, and who you are calling us to be, in Christ. Amen.

Last weekend, I took our daughter Emily to see the movie *Inside Out 2*. Have any of you seen it or are familiar with the original *Inside Out*? For those who aren't, these are animated movies about a 12-year-old girl named Riley and the challenges she faces growing up. So you see her moving to a new city, going to a new school, and trying to make friends. But the movie takes place primarily inside her brain. It shows you the inner workings of her mind, which is a room with a big console in it. The console has buttons and levers and joysticks that control everything she does. And the console is run by Riley's emotions. There are five emotions there – Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust – and they each take turns driving Riley.

Well, in this new movie, Riley hits puberty, and a whole new group of emotions come storming into her brain. There's Envy, Embarrassment, Boredom, and Anxiety. None of the emotions are depicted as *bad*. They're just *emotions*. At one point Anxiety says, "We all have a job to do. Joy makes Riley happy. Sadness makes her sad. Fear protects her from the scary stuff she can *see*, and my job is to protect her from the scary stuff she *can't* see! I plan for the future." I think that's a really helpful distinction to make: *fear* is about the scary things we can *see*, while *anxiety* is about the scary things that we *cannot* see. It's about the *what ifs*.

In this movie Riley is a hockey player, and as she is going away to a summer hockey camp, Anxiety says, "Okay, so my team has run all the data, and we're looking at the following likely

scenario: if Riley doesn't take this camp seriously and just goofs off, she's going to look really uncool in front of the other players. She won't impress the coach, she won't make the team, and when she arrives at high school, she won't have any friends. She will eat lunch alone every day, and only the teachers will know her name." So Anxiety starts trying to control *everything*. It starts running all around the console, pulling levers and pushing buttons faster and faster, until it's just a chaotic tornado swirling in Riley's brain, which results in Riley having an anxiety attack. But the whole *reason* Anxiety wanted to take over was to *protect* Riley and keep her *safe*.

Psychologist Lisa Damour says, "Anxiety is a natural and unavoidable aspect of life. It's there to alert us to potential threats, and to help us protect ourselves. In this way it serves as a valuable – in fact, indispensable – emotion." So anxiety can serve a *useful* function, since part of its role is imagining problems and planning out possible ways to overcome them. But, Damour says, "There is *healthy* anxiety, and there is *unhealthy* anxiety." When anxiety takes over and starts to direct all of our actions, it can either *paralyze* us and keep us from acting altogether, or it can cause us to act in ways that end up hurting ourselves and others.

I think we can *all* understand the desire to plan for the future in an attempt to control things that we ultimately cannot control. But there is an epidemic of anxiety in our country (in our *world*), *especially* among adolescents, and *especially* among adolescent *girls*. In his book *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt attributes that primarily to the rise of smart phones and unfettered access to the internet. And in her book *Generation Disaster*, Karla Vermeulen talks about how an entire generation has come of age in a world of constant crisis. Starting with September 11, they have lived under the constant threat of terrorism, war, mass shootings, *school* shootings, the

threat of climate change, economic instability, and fierce political divisiveness, one thing after another that leaves them in perpetual fear of *what's next*.

We *all* worry – some people more than others, but we all worry – whether it's about our families, our health, our jobs, our finances, our country, our church. Name pretty much *anything*, and we worry about what *might* happen with it in the future. It is a part of being human.

So when we hear Jesus say in this scripture reading, “Do not worry about your life...do not worry about tomorrow,” and when we hear Paul say to the Philippians, “Do not worry about anything,” it's kind of like, “Oh, okay! I just won't worry then! It's that easy!” If someone is very worried and anxious, and your advice to them is, “Don't worry,” that doesn't feel very helpful. So how *can* we keep our worry and anxiety from driving our lives and controlling everything we do? Well, I *do* think that what Jesus and Paul say is very helpful, because it's a whole lot more than just, “Don't worry.” They talk about *why* we shouldn't worry and what we can do instead. These might be familiar verses to a lot of us; we might have heard these over and over again, but sometimes we just need a reminder.

Let's start with what Paul says to the Philippians, the verses we read in our Call to Worship earlier. What he essentially says is, “Do not worry about anything, but pray about everything.” That's the first thing we can do when we experience anxiety and worries. We have to intentionally stop ourselves and turn to God and say, “God, I am worried about this thing. I am *scared*. I don't know what the future holds. Help me. Take care of me. Take these worries away from me. Help me to focus my mind on something *else*, something *good*.”

And that's the *next* thing that Paul says here, "Whatever is *true*, whatever is *honorable*, whatever is *just*, whatever is *pure*, whatever is *pleasing*, whatever is *commendable*, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about *these things*." When we begin to worry, instead of focusing on what is *wrong* or what might *go wrong*, we focus on what is *good* and *right*. We pull ourselves back from thinking about the *future* and ground ourselves in the *present*.

I've shared with you before that when I can't sleep at night, when my mind is racing and I'm worried about something, I make a list of three things that are good in my life. I can either write it down on paper or just make it in my head. *I have a family that loves me. I had a good dinner tonight. And I had a fun time watching the Phillies game with my kids.* It could be *anything*, but three things that are *good* in your life. I repeat that list to myself over and over again. And when those worries and anxious thoughts start trying to sneak back in, I stop myself and say, "No. I have a family that loves me. I had a good dinner tonight. And I had a fun time watching the Phillies game with my kids." Nine times out of ten, I'm asleep in five minutes.

Do not worry about anything, but pray about everything. Bring your worries to God. Focus on what is good and right in your life. And Paul says God's peace will be with you. This isn't going to keep you from ever worrying again. It's about what we *do* with our worries when they come.

Jesus says, "Do not worry about your life," and the reason he *gives* for that is because God takes care of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. They don't worry. They don't plan for the future. They don't even *work*. And God takes care of them. God provides them with everything they need to live. And Jesus says, "*You* are worth so much more to God than a bird or a flower.

You are created in the very *image* of God. God has breathed the breath of life into your body. So *how much more* will God take care of *you*?”

This is about remembering that *you belong to God*. God will take care of you because you are God’s precious, beloved child. God loves you *so much* that God became *like you* in Jesus Christ and gave up his life on a cross, forgiving our sin, so that we can live a *new* life in Christ. We can *bring* our worries to God in prayer, as Paul says, because we *belong* to God, and God *loves* us and *cares* for us. God will provide us with what we need to face the things that we are worried about.

Jesus is inviting us here to *trust*. To trust that God is *good* and that God will take care of us. Because God always *has*, right? You are *here*. That’s not to say that nothing has ever gone wrong, but God has provided for you and sustained your life to this point, and God will *continue* to do that in the future. Because you belong to God, and God loves you. And so maybe that’s something we say to ourselves when worries begin to take over, “I belong to God. God loves me. God will take care of me. God *always has*.”

So we bring our worries to God in prayer, we focus on what is good and right, and we trust that God will take care of us and provide what we need to live. Paul brings all of this together in our reading from Romans. He says that “the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

Sometimes we don't *know* what to say to God in prayer. "Do not worry about anything, but pray about everything," sometimes that is really hard. And what Paul says here is that when we don't know what to say, when we can't find the words, when all we can do is **sigh**, God hears that. Because God knows what is on our hearts and minds. God knows what we need before we even need it. And God's Spirit is at work in us, praying *for* us. So we are not left to handle our worries on our own. God is as close to us as our next breath, and God helps us when we cannot help ourselves.

Paul says, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose." He's not saying that all things *are* good, or that God makes everything that happens happen, but that God can take even the bad things in our lives and *use them* to do something *good*. *All things work together for good*. Maybe not right away. Maybe not tomorrow. We might not be able to see it for a long time. But God has a *goal* toward which our lives and all of creation is headed.

I've talked before about how it's like you're on a car trip from here to California. You've got the route all planned out on your GPS. You know exactly where you're going and how you're going to get there. But then you hit construction or an accident or some kind of detour in Ohio that takes you off your route. But the GPS starts *rerouting, rerouting*, and it finds a *new* route. You're still going to get to your ultimate destination. It just might look a little different than you planned. In that same way, God takes the accidents and the detours in our lives and reroutes us. We're still going to get where God wants us to go. It just might look a little different than we planned. God can take even the bad things in our lives and use them to do something good.

What this means is, we need to have a *long view* of life. Life is about more than *right now*. It's about more than *tomorrow*. So often our worries are about immediate problems. They might have lasting implications, but they are immediate problems. What Paul is telling us here is, "You're going to be okay. Even if you're not okay, you're *going* to be okay. Because God works all things together for good. God is *with you* and *for you*, and *nothing* can separate you from God's love."

When we experience anxiety and worries, we have to step back and take a long view of life; try to see a bigger picture. We have to find a way to ask – *in the moment* – "How might God be using this problem to lead me to something else, something *good*?" We have to drill into ourselves over and over again that we belong to God, and that God works all things for good. That in life and in death, we belong to God, so we are going to be okay, even if we're not okay. We counter worry and anxiety with *hope*. Anxiety is the anticipation of something *bad*. Hope is the anticipation of something *good*. And in Christ, we have been promised something good. We have been given a *living hope*. The world might be falling apart around us, but we belong to God, and nothing can *separate* us from God, and God can *use* those bad things to put us on a new path that gets us to the ultimate destination that God has for us.

Anxiety says, "What if something bad happens?" Hope says, "What if something *good* happens?" We are called in Christ to hope.

So when you start to experience anxiety and worries, bring those worries to God in prayer. Focus on what is good and right. Remember that you belong to God, and trust that God loves you and will provide you with exactly what you need to live. And when it's all too much for you, God's Spirit is at work in you, bringing about something *good*. Maybe not tomorrow.

Maybe not for a while. But eventually God is going to get you right where you need to be, and you are going to be okay, even if it's not okay. Amen.