

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Sermon on the Mount, July 23, 2023
Matthew 6:25-34
Be Not Anxious

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I mean to take on a big subject this morning. I mean Anxiety. My idea is this: Be rational and moral as you face the things of life, but be not anxious.

In our Gospel Lesson Jesus says this:

...do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?
(Matthew 6:25, NRSV)

Even people of good will might answer, “Well, if *I* do not worry about my life, who will?” And to this question, the great answer is, “God will. Your Maker will. He will worry about your life. So you can peddle onwards, doing the best you can day by day, and leave the rest to God.”

There are people who would never dream of breaking the Ten Commandments. They would never dream, say, of murder or robbery or adultery. And yet they hear the words of Jesus, “do not worry about your life,” and let them pass on by. They do not try to restructure their lives according to our Lord’s teaching.

Well, I understand that. Anxiety has a kind of momentum to it, like a runaway train. It is hard to simply stop it. Furthermore, our Maker has placed us into *this* century, into *this* land, and it is a time and place with its own fair share of troubles. We are not yet in heaven. The world around us requires thought and care and a kind of godly worry that we not squander our opportunities, nor place ourselves into danger. Many of the threats we face are common to people of all times and places — threats of illness or dementia or shifting marketplace or accidents. People of old also had a right to be anxious about crime and plagues and arthritis and declining strength and dwindling ability to take care of themselves and others. Back in 1947, W.H. Auden wrote a long poem called “The Age of Anxiety.” Leonard Bernstein was so moved by that poem that a couple years later he wrote a symphony with that title — “The Age of Anxiety.” But mercy! What age is not worthy of some anxiety? What age does not have its own troubles and worries? The task before us is to preserve thoughtfulness and carefulness as we face the threats of this world while at the same time building and maintaining a fundamental calmness and trust that all will be well. Pastor Carol has always been good at

that in our family. For example, when I would worry so much about how we were going to be able to pay for college for our boys, she would be always calm me down by saying “God will provide.” She really believes it, and so she helps me along.

I have heard that Pastor Raymond Schulze had a good saying about anxiety. Pastor Schulze was my predecessor here at Immanuel. He served here for twenty years. Pastor Schulze said that if you have burdens that you feel you cannot handle, and you just do not know which way to turn, then pray, and take all of that weight that you feel inside and ask Jesus to take that weight upon himself and to handle the burdens for you.

I love this saying because it is so close to one of our Lord’s own sayings — the one about the yoke. We read this in Matthew 11. The words of Jesus go this way:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.
(Matthew 11:28-30, RSV)

Now, with Pastor Schulze’s counsel, we are rather reversing this. Instead of Jesus inviting us to take his yoke upon us, we are asking him to take our burden upon himself. Surely he has done that for us on the cross. “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24), and is willing evermore to bear our burdens on himself. A couple Sundays from now, we will hear these great words of Jesus:

Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. (Matthew 7:7, RSV)

If we lived in a world in which we could not ask Jesus to help us, then I bet we would have reason to be fretful. But Jesus lives and we can ask him for help. Many people have done that, and they have found their burdens lifted. I am persuaded that we will never regret asking Jesus for help. It might take time, but one day we will find ourselves awfully grateful that we asked Jesus to help us.

St. Paul also sees a connection between prayer and some peace in this world. This is what he writes in Philippians 4:

6Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and

your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7, RSV)

That hymn we just sang — “This Is My Father’s World” (LBW 544)... it seems to me that if we really believe that this is my Father’s world, then we have a reason for some calmness and confidence as we go through life. But if we do not believe it — I mean in the depths of our souls — then probably we should be anxious. Being anxious seems pretty rationale to me if all we are is cosmic dust. But we believe the Doctrine of Creation. We believe that we are not cosmic dust or meaningless biochemical processes, but rather the creations of God, who would not have the universe to be without us. And in this universe, God rules. Listen again to the third verse of our hymn:

This is my Father’s world;
oh, let me not forget
that, though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the ruler yet.
This is my Father’s world;
why should my heart be sad?
The Lord is king, let the heavens ring;
God reigns, let the earth be glad! (LBW 554)

There is no shortage of astounding things in our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount. In an earlier sermon, I lifted up our Lord’s teaching to turn the other cheek when we are smitten and to love not just our neighbors, but also our enemies. It is an amazing teaching, is it not? Indeed, I suspect that some people have given their lives over to Jesus precisely because of his gentle preaching about turning the other cheek and loving the enemy. And, as far as lies possible to them, they have lived henceforth according to that rule (Romans 12:18).

Now, we hear Jesus preach another rule that at first glance also seems beyond human doing: I mean the rule, “Be not anxious.” Anxiety is a big problem for lots of people. It wearies them. It diminishes life. Anxiety holds them back from getting on in life. And it tempts them toward self-focus and neglect of others.

St. John Chrysostom pairs this teaching “be not anxious” with the preceding verse in our Lord’s sermon. That verse goes this way:

No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.
(Matthew 6:24, ESV)

And so it is that Jesus teaches that we must make our choice. No one else can make it for us: When push comes to shove and we face the big questions in life — the kinds of questions that reveal just who we really are — are we going to serve God or money? Jesus wants us to serve God, not money. That is what he did. The thing he wanted most in life was to do our heavenly Father's will. It left him a poor man, but he did not seem to care. Listen to his words:

The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head. (Matthew 8:20, KJV)

So be it. Jesus was focused on his work. Jesus, then, teaches us to prefer God to money. Now he comforts us about this choice. He bids us to not be anxious.

When it comes to anxiety, it is good to remember eternity. St. Paul does. The apostle writes this in this morning's Epistle Reading.

¹⁸I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. (Romans 8:18, NRSV)

Note that he is not saying that there are no sufferings in this present time. He is simply saying that he does not count them worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. St. Paul knew sufferings a plenty! He knew what it meant to be beaten, even stoned, shipwrecked, exhausted, let down by people he had counted on. When you suffer like this, it could well leave you gun-shy — anxious that it should never happen to you again. Especially I think about this matter of being stoned. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul reports that he was beaten with rods three times and he was stoned (2 Corinthians 11:25). We read about this in Acts Chapter 14. The text says that "they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead." He survived that, but it is dreadful to think about — dreadful to think of stones thudding into the human body. Such an awful thing could well leave you anxious. And yet St. Paul says that he considers such suffering to be unworthy of comparing with the glory ahead. That means that in all the ups and downs of life, St. Paul keeps his eyes ahead, on heaven. And that heavenly vision seems to calm him and give him some peace in this earthly life. Let us be mindful of heaven too. Let not anxiety rob us joy along this pilgrim way toward heaven.

Martin Luther has a fun saying about today's Gospel Lesson. He refers to the birds of the air as our "theologians and preachers." He really scolds us for our lack of peace. Here is one of his passages:

Now summer and winter the little birds keep on flying in the air, singing and frolicking, without a worry or concern

in the world, even though they do not know where their next meal is coming from...You see, He is making the birds our schoolmasters and teachers. It is a great and abiding disgrace to us that in the Gospel a helpless sparrow should become a theologian and a preacher to the wisest of men, and daily should emphasize this to our eyes and ears, as if he were saying to us: "Look, you miserable man! You have house and home, money and property. Every year you have a field full of grain and other plants of all sorts, more than you ever need. Yet you cannot find peace, and you are always worried about starving... Though we [birds] are innumerable, none of us spends his living days worrying. Still God feeds us every day." In other words, we have as many teachers and preachers as there are little birds in the air... Their singing of Lauds and of Matins to their Lord early in the morning before they eat is more excellent and more pleasant. Yet none of them knows of a single grain laid away in store. They sing a lovely, long Benedicite and leave their cares to our Lord God, even when they have young that have to be fed. Whenever you listen to a nightingale, therefore, you are listening to an excellent preacher. He exhorts you with this Gospel, not with mere simple words but with a living deed and an example. He sings all night and practically screams his lungs out. Can you not trust Him [God] to feed you as well, since He is your Father and calls you His children? (Martin Luther, LW 21)

"Take no thought for your life," Jesus says. To me, it seems inevitable that Jesus must speak of peace in his great sermon. He must speak of peace and against anxiety because that is what He means for this world. He means peace, which we should not throw away. Jesus would have us know that the angel Gabriel was serious when he greeted Mary with the words, "Do not be *afraid*, Mary..." (Luke 1:30). Jesus would have us know that reality itself was greeting us when the angel greeted the shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night:

⁹And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. ¹⁰And the angel said to them, "*Be not afraid*; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people... (Luke 2:9-10, RSV)

It is going to take a great cost that this Christmas-time greeting might be true. A heart-breaking price is to be paid that “a great *joy* ...will come to all the people.” But Jesus, who preaches this golden Sermon on the Mount stands ready to pay that price. He will pay it on the cross. And so it is that the angels, the sparrows, the nightingales, and Jesus himself in his great sermon invite us to have some peace in this life, even more peace than perhaps we have known so far, thanks to the grace and merits of Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.