

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
February 27, 2011
Matthew 6:24-34

Epiphany 8, Year A

“It is easier to bear death when you're not thinking about it, than thinking about your death when there is no danger.” That's one of my favorite quotes from Pascal's *Pensees* (166), because it applies to the horrible things we can imagine, such as death, and it applies to the ordinary worries that bring us down on a daily basis. It is often easier to bear a bad thing happening, than to worry about a bad thing that isn't happening. To sum it up more succinctly, “dreading it is worse than doing it.”

“Dreading it is worse than doing it” is a motto I started repeating to myself a few years ago. Every once in a while I tell it to a friend. When I started using this motto, I figured that while it was probably true most of the time, the time would come when I'd have to eat my words, because I would come up against a situation in which doing something turned out to be worse than dreading it. The reality is, that has not actually happened. No matter what it was that I was dreading--a very difficult conversation, handling a loss, a project that made me feel helpless, frustrated, and stupid, a hated activity, even chemo treatments—in absolutely every situation, dreading it was worse than doing it.

There are at least two reasons for that. One is that worry focuses on the worst case scenario: that the person I am talking to will be not just annoyed, but livid, or that the loss will be not just sad, but devastating. Just by the law of averages, the worst case scenario comes around pretty seldom. We usually get the average case scenario, or the slightly-below average case scenario, and sometimes even the better-than average case scenario.

The second reason is probably more significant, which is that worry involves helplessness. While I can imagine myself doing all sorts of smart things in a tough situation, nothing actually gets any better. Dealing with an unpleasant reality at least has the satisfaction of doing something. Even when there isn't some kind of activity or accomplishment in a bad situation, there is something satisfying about simply getting through it. You absorb the loss or feel the pain, and then life goes on. Dreading it is worse than doing it. And dreading it is worse than enduring it.

I am very fond of Jesus' words in today's gospel reading. Today we get Jesus telling us, "Don't worry, be faithful":

"Therefore I tell you, 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? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you-- you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

Even with all my fondness for this passage, the advice Jesus gives here has seemed easier said than done. In the past, I have looked at this passage as a pleasant way to live if only you could actually do it. But, I thought, I do worry and I can't help it! Now, though, I am starting to question my attitude about that. Am I being completely honest with myself here? This time I notice something Jesus says that I had not paid much attention to before: Jesus asks, "And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" On one level, that's the kind of rhetorical question that is designed to make us say, "Of course not!" Even Pascal knew that thinking about death when there is no danger, does not mean your actual death will happen any later. In fact, modern science keeps producing more and more evidence that people who worry the most have shorter lives, in support of this idea that Jesus told us about 2000 years ago.

Still, this is one of those verses that doesn't just glide through my mind; this is one of those verses that is sniffing and digging in my mind like a small dog. It turns out that there is another attitude buried under my claims that I can't help the fact that I worry; the digging unearths an attitude that I have to worry or else I won't be prepared for the bad things that might happen. I have the sense that thinking through every possible negative event is a necessary part of being able to handle it.

The irony is that the things I worry about are not the things that I do something useful about. Because once I start actually doing something, the worry subsides. Instead of worrying about how I will do on a test, I could actually study. And the studying replaces the worry in my mind. Or instead of worrying about how an upcoming sermon is going to turn out, I could actually sit down and write it! I wonder how often procrastination and worry are closely intertwined. Is it that worry can make us less prepared rather than more?

And where does this idea come from that I have to worry because otherwise I won't be able to handle the ups and downs of life? I think that's the question Jesus is really moving toward in this passage. In the past, this scripture has seemed a little too easy to be glib about. I read that we don't have to worry about having enough food or clothes, and I think, okay, I've always had enough food and clothes, but I know there are people in the world who don't have enough clothes or even food. What about them? Jesus is not unaware of them. In fact, Jesus tells us specifically to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. But really, am I in danger of dying of starvation? Jesus reminds me to get a sense of perspective about the things I worry about. I stress over things going wrong, but do these things mean I'll end up living in a cardboard box on the street? When Jesus sees me getting into a tizzy, does Jesus shake his head and laugh and say, "Hey, relax. How about if you tried trusting that you'll be fine."

One of the most worrisome times I've been through was the year I had cancer while I was in seminary. I remember going to see my spiritual director, and spilling out my worries and my tears. I told her that I was worried that I would die, I was worried that I would wind up in a dysfunctional congregation that leaves its clergy deeply hurt, I was worried that I wouldn't be able to live up to my calling and that I would end up hurting parishioners. My spiritual director was a wise and sympathetic woman, who listened compassionately, and then calmly told me that everything I worried about would actually happen to me. That was not what I expected to hear. She said, well, you will die. Whatever congregation you go to, you will get hurt by people in your congregation. You will fail to live up to your calling and end up hurting people in your congregation. And as I reflected on that, I realized she was right. And I realized that even though

painful things will happen in my life, I wanted to take the good with the bad, and find the grace of God in all of it.

I think I have to worry because I have to avoid pain. When actually, I don't have to avoid pain. God knows that. As with most of our attempts to avoid pain, the avoidance mechanisms cause more problems than the pain itself. The pain itself is, oddly enough, something I actually can handle. When I know I am loved and cared for, pain is pretty manageable.

When I focus on my worries in an attempt to avoid the bad things, I end up avoiding most of the good things too. When my focus is on my worry, I am most likely to forget about God. When I worry, I miss the fact that God has showered my life with blessings: that blessings are strewn around me like lilies in a field, that blessings soar above me like birds of the air. These are the things Jesus wants me finally to notice. Look, blessings are everywhere! If I worry about what I might lack in the future, I miss the enjoyment of the abundant gifts from God that I have in the present. Look, blessings are everywhere! I have more than enough food. I have more than enough clothes. I have more than enough love. God has supplied all my needs and more. Instead of worrying about death, I can go ahead and fully live.