Sunday, March 1, 1981
DO NOT WORRY!
Matthew 6:24-34

Being anxious, which is better known as excessive worry, is such a part of our everyday life and is so much around us that without it life seems almost impossible. Further-more there is a suspicion among some people that to have no worries and be carefree is unrealistic and maybe even dangerous.

And of course, not all worry is bad for us. We need to be concerned about housing, education, medical care, taking precautions against accidents, doing our jobs well, making our marriages work, planning for the future, and more. The right kind of worry can motivate us to work hard, to prepare ourselves for the future and to be con-cerned about our overall we1£are and the we1£are of others.

The problem is that for too many people, worry is at the center of their lives so that it consumes too much of life's energy. We worry about so many things, some im-portant and others not important. For example, too many people worry about whether or not they are liked and accepted by others; whether or not they have value and are worthwhile. This kind of worry is one which comes from a basic sense of insecurity, low self-image, and it can consume a lot of our energy.

Then too, there are people for whom the normal daily con-cerns of life develop into intense feelings of anxiety. It's so easy to become a chronic worrier and to magnify the possible evils or threats which face us until we paralyze our power of action.

There are also people who skimp and save, who lower their ethical standards, who go too far into debt, who some- times cheat and steal, and who sacrifice or break inter- personal relations, in order to achieve a material posse-ssion which they believe is the mark of a successful person. Our scale of values can be twisted around that we are more anxious about food or clothing or gadgets than anything else in life.

Excessive worry about anything, worrying about the wrong things have a negative effect on our mind and body. More and more we are learning that unmanaged stress is a major cause of all kinds of illness and there's a direct re-lationship between worry and stress.

Professor Henri Nouwen, who will be a featured speaker here in our church on March 13, likes to point out that we have difficulty in handling our worries and the re-sulting stress and tension because our lives are at the same time filled and unfilled.

Our lives are filled in that we are very busy. There are many things to do each day, people to meet, projects to finish, letters to write, calls to make, appointments to keep. Most of us feel that we are always behind schedule. We have a nagging sense that there are unfinished tasks, unfulfilled promises, unrealized proposals.

There are always things we haven't done or should've done. There are people whom we did not speak to or visit; jobs we haven't finished. So, in addition to the fact that we are very busy, we also have the feeling of never actually fulfilling our obligations.

On the other hand, it is very difficult not to be busy. In our society, being busy is a symbol of importance. We don't like to admit that we are not busy. We imply with our comments that a minute taken from a person whose agenda is filled is worth much more than an hour from someone who has little to do.

So our lives are very busy, we are all the time occupied. In addition, we are also preoccupied, which means we are worried about what might happen in the future, as if we didn't have enough to occupy us in the present. That's what Jesus was talking about when he said, "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own troubles be sufficient for the day."

In a sermon some months ago, I called these worries about the future the "what ifs." What if my child is not home on time? What if there is not enough food for tomorrow? What if I cannot pay my bills on time? What if I am attacked? What if a war starts? What if the world comes to an end? What if I get cancer? Now if these worries about the future cause you to take some constructive •-steps to prevent some of these things happening, then they have served a good purpose. But most of us do not go any further than worrying about these "what ifs."

Also, if we worry too much about the future it can paralyze us in the present. If I begin worrying about all those sermons I'm going to have to prepare for the next 15 years, I won't have any energy left to prepare the sermon for this week. I have to do what needs to be done now, and then tackle the next job and then the next. "Do one thing at a time and be all there when you do it." I cannot be all there when I am doing a task if I'm also worrying about tomorrow's work.

The world around us helps keep us pre-occupied about the future. The way in which the newspapers, radio and TV communicate the news can create an atmosphere of constant emergency. The excited voices of the reporters, their prediction for gruesome accidents, cruel crimes and perverted behavior and the hour-to-hour coverage of human misery at home and abroad, can slowly engulf us with an all-pervasive sense of impending doom.

Add to this the continual bombardment of advertisements and their unrelenting insistence that we will miss out on something very important if we do not read this book, see this movie, hear this speaker, or buy this product deepens our restlessness and covers our emptiness.

The point is that even though our lives are filled and preoccupied, beneath all of our worry about many things, under all of our busyness, there is an emptiness. We are filled, yet unfilled. That's what Jesus knew. By emptiness I mean lack of purpose, lack of direction; we lack an integrating center which guides all that we do. While being busy with and worried about many things, we seldom. feel satisfied or at peace.

Along with being unfilled we can harbor deep resentments. While we are busy, we are at the same time wondering if our busyness means anything to anyone. Does it accomplish anything worthwhile?

Into all of this come the words of Jesus Christ, "Do not worry! What does he mean and how can we come to the point of not worrying?

First, there are several things he does not mean. Jesus is not simply patting us on the back and saying, "Don't worry, everything will come out all right." He knew that things do not always come out all right. He is not saying that God will step in to correct all our follies and omissions.

He is not saying that those who trust God will never be injured or persecuted. He is not saying that we should ignore food or clothes or housing or medi-cal care.

Nor is Jesus saying that we should take care of our worries by running away. He does not ask us to give up the many important causes we are involved in. He does not ask us to withdraw from the world and live quiet peaceful lives removed from the struggles and ugliness of life.

He asks us rather to shift our center of attention, to change our direction, to refocus our emphasis. He wants us to find a new center. What is this center? Jesus calls it God's Kingdom. But let's translate that into other words. It means to make the life of God's Spirit our priority, or, in other words, to put our spiritual life at the center of our life.

Life is meant to be lived from a Divine Center. That's because our ultimate destiny is in control of God who is eternal. When we put God's Spirit or allow God's Spirit to be at the center of our living and keep ourselves open and make room for it in the center of our lives, then we tie our feebleness to an Eternal Power· and Purpose and all of life is different because it begins from a different point.

On the other hand, when we make no room for God's Spirit at the center of our lives, then we are detached from God, then we are trying to be self-sufficient and live on our own power and soon everything threatens our existence. When God is the center of our lives, then life gets its power, its vitality, its meaning from an inexhaustible source and nothing can ultimately threaten our existence. Then no worry can knock us off center.

When God is at the center of our living, the we no longer think of ourselves as nothings who need to acquire worth by our own effort. This basic worry is erased and eliminated. There is a worth to each one of us the moment we are created, a worth that nothing can ultimately destroy because it has been given to us by God.

One man put it this way, "Instead of having to go out and find cards in order to get in on the game of life, I realized that I had already been dealt a hand of cards and the agenda was to pick them up gratefully and see how I could play with them with relish and abandon."

It's one thing to try to acquire light and try to make a shining place for yourself by strenuous effort. It is another thing altogether to realize you are light by the grace of creation and are called on solely to let that light shine through you and beyond you.

The life of Jesus was a busy one. The Gospels portray this clearly. But in the middle of his busyness, there was a calmness and serenity. To live a spiritual life does not mean that we 1eave our busyness or our job, or change our way of working; it does not mean that we have to withdraw from social or political activities; it does not require long hours of prayer or meditation each day. Religion is not something to be added to our other duties or busyness and thus make our lives more complex or worrisome. The life with God is the center of life and all else is remodeled and integrated by it.

So, when Jesus said, "Do not worry," he is not telling us to put aside the tasks or responsibilities that cause our worries, he is rather giving us a way to recenter our lives so that worry will not be a major factor anymore.

How then do we put God into the center of our lives so that worry and anxiousness are no longer bothersome to us?

One thing above all else is needful in order to put God's Spirit in the center of our lives. We need some kind of spiritual discipline. We need to create some free empty space within us so that it can be occupied by God's Spirit. A spiritual discipline is a concentrated effort to keep both inner and outer space in our lives free so that the Spirit of God can manifest itself to us and elicit our careful attention.

A spiritual discipline requires above all else some time for solitude and solitude begins with a time and place for God and for God alone. Thay's why Jesus said to go to your private room and when you have shut the door, then pray to God. It means being alone with God with no out-side distractions. There will be plenty of inside dis-tractions and it's enough to deal with those.

It takes time to find solitude within us even though it is quiet all around us for we cannot immediately shut out of our minds all our inner doubts, anxieties, fears, bad memories, angry feelings, impulsive desires, worries, thinking about things that need to be done. In fact, when the outer distractions are removed, then the inner distractions are more evident. Maybe that's why so many avoid solitude and a place of quiet without any outside distractions.

Finding a time and place for solitude takes carefu1 plan-ning for most of us. Begin with five or ten minutes each day and stick with it — let nothing interrupt it.

In the beginning, and this could be for weeks or even months, you. have the feeling that you are wasting your time. The time in solitude may seem like nothing more than a time in which you are bombarded by thousands of thoughts and feelings that emerge from the hidden areas of your mind. You may find yourself daydreaming or fal-ling asleep. But if you keep at it, slowly you will begin to realize that even though nothing seems to happen, you do not want to miss your time alone with God. This is often the first sign of prayer, the simple desire to be with God.

If we keep with our time of solitude each day and slowly empty ourselves of our many preoccupations, we will come to realize that we were never alone, and that God's spirit was with us all along. In this way our worries will slowly lose their power over us, and space opens up so that God's Spirit can breathe freely in us and through us.

The Season of Lent begins this Wednesday. It's an ideal time to begin one's practice of a spiritual discipline. I invite you to begin with the Ash Wednesday service of Holy Communion. Begin now to make space for God and your worries will also begin to fade away.