Sunday, November 14, 1999
MAKING WORRY WORK FOR YOU
Matthew 25:14-30

Worry is a universal condition for human beings. Some kinds of worrying can be helpful, and other kinds can be harmful. Someone once described worry as “the interest paid on trouble before it is due.” The root cause of much of our worrying is the fear of loss and fear of failure. For example, we worry about old age because we fear the loss of our health or the loss of friends or family members. We worry about taking risks because of the fear of failure.

In the parable of the talents that Jesus told, which was read as the scripture for today, we discover both kinds of worry — harmful and helpful. First, let’s examine the harmful kind. The individual who was given only one talent was so worried that he might lose the money entrusted to him that instead of making use of it in any way, he went and hid it in the ground. He even worried about making a conservative investment. He was a true believer in Murphy’s Law: “If anything can go wrong, it will.” Incidentally, it has been discovered that Murphy’s Law was not propounded by Murphy, but by another man of the same name.

This individual was undoubtedly the kind of person who worried about everything. He worried so much that he was in a state of paralysis. I read somewhere the other day that people who worry this much are two and a half times more likely to suffer heart attacks than less stressed-out individuals. People like this individual spend most of their lives trying to avoid loss, which becomes a very negative way of living.

Incidentally, this parable is not telling us that there aren’t times in life when it’s quite appropriate to be concerned with avoiding loss. Having insurance on one’s home, automobile, or other property to avoid loss is sensible. Following good health habits to avoid losing one’s health is a wise thing to do. This is not a story telling us to practice reckless living without using common sense. Rather, it is saying that excessive worry about losing what God has given us is not the way to discover the abundant life that Jesus promised.

The big problem with excessive worry about loss or failure is that we often learn the best lessons from losing or failing. Worry can cause people to quit situations too early, preventing them from learning the lessons that were there to be learned.

One wise person put it this way: “We need to think of life as an art form, as a movement from one lesson to another until we gain mastery.” But mastery doesn’t exist as a possibility for the individual in this story who hid his talent in the ground. His excessive worry about avoiding loss kept him from mastering anything.

Worry can inspire action or stop it cold. If I notice an unusual symptom, it might prompt me to see a doctor — that’s helpful worry. Or it can scare me so much that I am afraid to do anything because I worry it’s going to be bad news — that’s harmful worry.

The first two individuals in the parable had helpful worry. The idea that the property owner expected a lot from them, trusted them, and wanted results spurred them into action. There can be hidden value in worry. They made their worry work for them. But the third individual was paralyzed by his worry into inaction, letting worry work against him.

As I studied this story again this past week, I noticed something new. The third individual in the parable blamed his excessive worry and inaction on his boss. When asked for an accounting, he said (and I'm paraphrasing), "I know you are a very demanding and unforgiving person, a harsh man, that you like to make money even when you don't work for it. So, I was afraid and I hid the talent in the ground." What I hadn't noticed before is that there is no indication in the story that this was a correct assessment of the property owner. The first two individuals didn't seem to have this opinion. In fact, the property owner's response to the third worker suggests the opposite. He said (again paraphrasing), "If you really think I'm such a demanding person, making money where I don't deserve it and trying to get all I can get no matter the method, then you should've at least invested my money with the bankers. When I returned, I would have received what was mine with interest."

The third worker used a familiar tactic: he blamed his harmful worrying on someone else. "It's not my fault," he said. "If you weren't so demanding and unfair, I wouldn't have worried so much."

If you think this kind of harmful worrying is rare, consider this: according to Dr. Edward Hallowell, a psychiatrist and instructor at the Harvard Medical School, nearly half of the American people are consumed with one kind of harmful worry or another.

How then can we turn harmful worrying into helpful worrying? How can we make worry work for us rather than against us? Let's see what this parable has to say about that. Remember, too, that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had some words about worry. He said, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ... 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."

The first suggestion for making worry work for you rather than against you comes from this parable. Jesus was reminding us that God does not compare us with others. A lot of harmful worry comes from the belief that God does compare us with others. In the story, the property owner gave one person five shares, another two, and another one. Life is like that. God loves and cares for us equally, even though we all have differing abilities and talents. Like the human body, the human race is made up of many parts. We are to rejoice in our diversity. The Apostle Paul wrote, "If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?" He also said, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you,' and the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you.'" The important issue is not what we've been given, but what we do with what has been given to us. When we focus on creatively using what we have, our harmful worry begins to turn into helpful worry.

The story implies that if the third servant, who had been given one share, had tried to make good use of it and even lost it in the process, the property owner wouldn't have been angry. In fact, the story reminds us that if we do not use what we have been given, we're going to lose it anyway. So, it's better to risk and lose than not to risk at all. We've all heard the saying, "Use it or lose it," and that's exactly what happened to the overly worried man in this story. The property owner said, "Take the talent from him and give it to the one with ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

The second suggestion for making worry work for you rather than against you comes from this story as well. The man who buried the talent did so because he was excessively worried about the future. His worry immobilized him. Again, lest you misunderstand, when Jesus tells us not to worry, he isn't saying, "Don't worry; everything will come out all right." He knew that things don't always turn out to our satisfaction. He isn't saying that God will step in to correct all our mistakes or prevent harm from coming to us. He isn't saying we should ignore food, clothes, housing, or medical care. What he's saying is that excessive worry about the future is harmful and not helpful. It puts our focus on the wrong things.

To make worry work for you rather than against you, it's necessary to live primarily in the present rather than the past or the future. In the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own."

A minister friend of mine tells this story. In Italy, between Padua and Ferraro, there is a villa with 365 windows. That's plenty of windows even for a large house. But some people say the original builder had the 365 days of the year in mind when he installed the windows. Perhaps the builder was suggesting that one should look upon the world each day from a different window.

This suggests an exciting philosophy to live by each day of the year. It will help rescue you from harmful worry. Each day brings its own unique gifts. It is up to us to untie the ribbons and accept the offerings as they appear.

An intelligent response to life is to find something positive in each new day. Unfortunately, many people simply endure the present and wait for a better time or worry about a worse time in the future. Today is always seen as ordinary. It is yesterday that may have been better or worse, and tomorrow that can be filled with possibilities or problems. Some people worry too much about what happened yesterday and also too much about what could happen tomorrow and forget to live in today.

The Bible tells us that when we remember that each moment is alive with eternal issues, then we, in some measure, begin to participate in the activity of a timeless God. Then, we begin to receive God's continuing gifts.

Furthermore, we are not merely the recipients of each day's gifts but can determine, in large measure, what we shall put into the day. It is like filling our own stocking. It is seldom true that we do not have a choice. Therefore, it's helpful to have some minimal goals for each day. As someone said, "No wind is favorable to one who does not know into which port he is trying to sail."

Here are some elementary goals for each day that will help make your worrying work for you rather than against you. Begin each day with the affirmation found in Psalm 118:24: "This is the day God has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." Practice distinguishing what is more important from what is less important without making what is less important unimportant. Avoid procrastination. Do what you need to do when you need to do it, whether you feel like it or not. Learn to pause occasionally, or nothing important will catch up with you. Do one thing at a time, and be fully present when you do it.

On Toscanini's 80th birthday, someone asked his son, Walter, what his father considered his most important achievement. The reply was, "For him, there can be no such thing. Whatever he happens to be doing at the moment is the biggest thing in his life — whether it is conducting

a symphony or peeling an orange.” Do something for someone else each day at some cost to yourself. More and more, I am convinced that the waste of life lies in the love we have not given and the powers we have not used. The selfish prudence exhibited by the third individual in this parable, who risked nothing and attempted to avoid pain, misses happiness as well. Amen.