Book 38

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 harmful. Someone 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 our friends or family members. We worry about taking any kind of risk because of fear of failure.

In the parable of the talents which Jesus told

and which was read as the scripture reading 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 that was entrusted to him so 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 over everything. He worried so much that he was in a state of

paralysis. I was reading somewhere the other day that people who worry this much are two and one-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 and it becomes a very negative kind of living.

Incidentally the parable is not telling us that there aren't times in life when it's quite appropriate to be concerned with the avoidance of loss. Having insurance on one's home and automobile or other property to avoid loss is quite sensible. Following good health habits to avoid losing one's good health is a wise thing to do. This is not a story which is telling us to practice reckless living without using any common sense at all. It is saying

that excessive worry about the loss of what God has given us is not the way to discover the kind of abundant life which Jesus promised.

The big problem with excessive worry about loss or failure is that there are times when we learn the best lessons from losing or from failing. There are times when worry can cause people to quit situations too early to have learned the lessons that were there for them to learn.

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 to another until we gain mastery. But mastery doesn't exist as a possibility in the individual in this story who

went and hid his talent in the ground. His excessive worry about the avoidance of loss kept him from mastering anything.

Worry can inspire action or stop it cold. If I notice some unusual symptom that I have not been aware of before, it can cause me to see a physician as soon as possible--that's helpful worry, or it can scare me so much that I am afraid to do anything because I 'm worried that it's going to be bad news--that's harmful worry.

The first two individuals in the story had helpful worry. The idea that the property owner expected a lot from them and trusted them and wanted results spurred them into action. There can be a hidden value in worry.

They made their worry work for them. But the third individual was frozen from his worry into inaction. That's keeping worry from working for you.

As I was studying this story again this past week, as often happens with Bible stories, I noticed something that I had never noticed before. The third individual in the story blamed his excessive worry and his resulting inaction on his boss. When the boss 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." Here's what I never noticed before. There is not any indication in

the story as Jesus told it that this was a correct assessment of the property owner. There is no hint at all that the first two individuals had this opinion of their boss. In fact the property owner's response to the third worker seems to indicate just the opposite. He said to his employee, and again I'm paraphrasing, "If you really think that I am such a demanding person, making money where I don't deserve it and trying to get all I can get no matter what the method, then you should've at least invested my money with the bankers and when I returned I would have received that which was my own with interest."

The third worker in the story was using a familiar tactic. He blamed his excessive harmful worrying on someone else. "It's not

my fault," he said, "if you weren't such a demanding and unfair person, I wouldn't have worried so much."

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

How then can we turn our harmful worrying into helpful worrying? How can we make worry work for us rather than against us? Let's see what this story Jesus told has to say about that. Remember too that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also 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 you as well....So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." We'll come back to this later.

The first suggestion about how to make worry work for you rather than against you comes from this story itself. Jesus was reminding us with this parable that God does not compare us with others. A lot of our harmful worry comes from thinking 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 went on to say, "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's been given to us. When we begin focusing on creatively using what we have, then 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 perhaps even lost it in the process, the property owner would've not been angry. In fact the story reminds us that if we do not use what has been given us 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 old 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 also comes from this story. The man in the story who buried the talent did so because he was excessively worried about the future. It was harmful worry because it immobilized him from doing anything. Again, lest you misunderstand, when Jesus tells us not to worry the message is not, "Don't worry, everything will come out all right." He knew that things do not always come out all right to our satisfaction. 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 have any harm come to them. He is not saying that we should ignore food or clothes or housing or medical care. He is saying 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 is necessary to live primarily in the present rather than in 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, is a villa with 365 windows. That's plenty of windows even in 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 could and 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 does bring its own unique gifts. It remains for 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 commonplace. 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 possibly happen tomorrow and forget all about living today.

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

Furthermore, we are not merely the recipients of each day's gifts but we can determine in large measure what we shall put into the day. It is like filling our own stocking. For 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 which 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 the thing you have to do when you have 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 all there 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 that risks nothing and attempts to avoid pain misses happiness as well. Amen.