



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

June 27, 2021

My Favorite Bible Challenge

Dr. Jo Forrest

© 2021 by Dr. Jo Forrest and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: June 29, 2021

In Matthew's gospel Jesus ascends a mountain for his first sermon. He attracts crowds of people, those living day-to-day, the bottom of the rung in society, and preaches the comforting words of the Beatitudes.

Blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, the poor in spirit. Having captured their attention, assures them of God's love and then unravels the commands of how to behave when persecuted – "let them do more." Turn the other cheek. Love your enemy.

In these reversals, Jesus moves them towards God and not revenge.

He instructs them through The Lord's Prayer to pray for God's will be done and daily bread, again, pointing them to entrust God for eternity and today.

This Sermon on the Mount outlines these blessings and instructions before leveling a seemingly impossible challenge.

Dear God, we pray that we may incline our ears to you. Still our minds from racing in so many directions that we are at one with you and your holy spirit. May these ancient words speak clearly to us so that we tune our lives to please you. Amen.

Matthew 6:24-34

²⁴ “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve God and wealth.

²⁵ “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?

²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet God feeds them.

Are you not of more value than they?

²⁷ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?

²⁸ And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin,

²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will God not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’

³² For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed God knows that you need all these things.

³³ But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

³⁴ “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

Prior to the pandemic, what kept you up at night? Mortgage payments, parent’s health, kids’ schooling and their mental health, maybe client presentations, or a demanding job.

A quick study pre-pandemic showed that 47% of the time, people were consumed with thoughts of the future or past, not today. If you ever felt alone in your worries, you are not.¹

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/20/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-judson-brewer.html?showTranscript=1>

We all experienced some level of anxiety and then the pandemic erupted, it upended so much of our routines, including our worries. No one seemed to know when the pandemic would fade while some denied its lethal strength, exacerbating the worries of others.

Do we trust Dr. Fauci or internet remedies?

Can we buy enough toilet paper and frozen pizza?

What does one wear on a Zoom call with clients or a prospective interview?

Our technology woes went into overdrive as we learned new applications, paid premiums for new cameras and lights, with the added stress of feeling like a neophyte on Zoom and then the internet crashes.

Worries mounted with, “will I keep my job to do I want to keep this job?”

I think of a friend with two elementary school daughters who switched from color-coded charts to monitor the carpools to a series of iPhone alarms that started in the early morning. She sent me a screen shot of her phone that listed an event each morning spaced eight to ten minutes apart on M-W-F and slightly different on T-Th for the various zoom classrooms.

When she held staff meetings on her own zoom account, she confided she had one ear bud for church and another ear bud for which ever daughter might have the greater struggle in class.

As a pastor putting on a calm face for the congregation, her anxiety level skyrocketed in just trying to keep the plates spinning while the floor seemed to move.

Not everyone experienced the pandemic this way. Other friends remark, very quietly, what a blessing it has been to have adult children return home for extended stretches of time and the joy of family dinners. Now they wonder if they will keep this sense of intimacy.

We worried as friends and family became mildly sick, others dangerously ill. Our inconveniences pale as so many grieve the deaths of those, they loved, who died.

It is no wonder stress-related symptoms and other measures of anxiety among adults doubled since the pandemic.²

Merely repeating the recent history fatigues me, I just want to put it all behind and move forward. Yet, we carry the wounds from this trauma and are seeing the impact of it played in our community, families, and ourselves.

² Joshua Gordon, "One Year In: COVID-19 and Mental Health," *The National Institute of Mental Health*. April 9, 2021, www.nimh.nih.gov.

The increase in road rage, unruly airline passengers, and snapping at one another only hint at our anxiety. Too many of us prefer to wear a mask that pretends “I am just fine” rather than face whatever gnaws inside.

The pandemic taught us just how debilitating it is to try to control our lives – and how pointless such a quest always is.

To tell someone to not worry is futile. It is kind of like telling someone to not think of an elephant. Do not imagine a grey trunk and floppy ears. And, you imagine Dumbo.

To tell someone not to worry usually irritates the recipient of the message.

Those peasants on the hillside came to hear Jesus if could relieve their poverty and hunger. Life in first century Palestine for a Jew in occupied Roman occupied territory felt like one long trauma after another of taxation, oppressive laws to siphon away their land and little savings, and an ever threat of violence.

For these peasants to be met with “do not worry” about money could have felt like an insult.

As Swiss scholar, Ulrich Luz, has put it, when interpreted in a superficial manner, Jesus’ statements to not worry about food or clothing or shelter could only have been spoken by a single guy living a carefree life on the beach in sunny Galilee.

A superficial reading also suggests that one does not need to work, save money, or prepare for the future at all; we can simply relax knowing that God will take care of our needs.

But as most of us know, this does not seem to match what we know of life at any time in history or in any community.

Jesus is addressing the basis for excessive worry and anxiety that can result from a life separated from God. Our lives are defined not by what we possess, but by what we seek. What purpose do we pursue? How do I lives communicate what and who we love?

This isn't the first time a message like this appears in scripture.

“Do not worry.” “Do not be anxious.” “Do not be afraid.” If all the forms of this plea are tallied from angels, prophets, Jesus, and the apostles, more than 365 times we hear “do not be afraid” in our sacred text.

Throughout scripture, we hear stories of someone at a crossroads or at the time of trial, and a divine messenger comes into his or her life with the salve, “do not be afraid.”

The key is what follows after “do not be afraid” or “do not worry.” The messenger reveals a new path, requiring courage, and leading to life.

No one ever understood that more profoundly than Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who would lose everything as a prisoner of the Nazis, for his opposition to Hitler, and would ultimately be executed.

He wrote, “The life of discipleship can only be maintained as long as nothing is allowed to come between Christ and ourselves. This is not a moral law, a rule to be followed ... it is the gospel of Christ.”³

It is finally a matter of determining who and what is in charge of your life. If it is your fear, your worry, your anxiety, you are not fully alive. If it is God, you enjoy what you are given, with gratitude, and live in the safety of God’s love.

Jesus was inviting them to trust that love—to trust him. He was offering them an opportunity to live life fully—without anxiety, to experience each day, not for what it can add or produce, but as God’s wondrous gift. God will give you all you truly need, he promised.

Coming out of the pandemic, it appears as though people are listening to Jesus’ challenge to not worry and choose life. We are entering what some journalists are calling The Great Resignation of 2021.

³ Dietrich Bonehoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon and Schuester, 1995) p.159-161.

In April some four million people quit their jobs. These were not just the mid- and higher-level jobs in which someone might have had a nest egg to cushion any fall.

Aislinn Potts from Murfreesboro, TN said “It was a really dismal time, and it made me realize this isn’t worth it.” She left her \$11-an-hour job at a pet store to focus on writing and art. “My life isn’t worth a dead-end job.”

Last month, Christina Noles from Concord, N.C., quit. Now she works from home for a local law firm. She said, “There’s a part of me that feels like this must all be a dream. There were a lot of things I liked about retail: I love talking to people and helping them, but the pandemic made me realize it was untenable.”⁴

Some 40% of workers say they’d rather quit than return to office full-time. To be sure, the return-to-office scramble is unthinkable for many workers because of health or other family-related reasons. But for others, the return is untenable because a newfound commitment to living on purpose won’t let them go back to be handcuffed to the habits of before.⁵

⁴ Abha Bhattarai, “Retail workers are quitting at record rates for higher-paying work: ‘My life isn’t worth a dead-end job,’” *The Washington Post*, June 21, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/06/21/retail-workers-quitting-jobs/?utm_campaign=wp_main&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook&fbclid=IwAR2gK9RqSaHSPLicCu8IEeC3VJKPdS5pZXtMnSKNOLER2_VECmzJF9cGzHA

⁵ Nicholas Pearce, “Discovering Purpose in the Pandemic,” *Forbes*, June 21, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nicholaspearce/2021/06/21/discovering-purpose-in-the-pandemic/?sh=48169d0e5908>

The movement from the pandemic into a new future invites all sorts of choices. This Great Resignation also inspire some of us to leave behind the demands of routines that the pandemic shuttered and time revealed they are not of value. What caused worry? Was it worth it?

In our choices, lawyers may continue to be lawyers and with the renewed commitment this is how he or she gives glory to God and not in service to some schedule or plan measured by another. Same with anyone in accounting or parenting.

We cannot control our lives, but we can choose which master we will serve.

Where do you feel God's call? Only one master, God, will meet us with a love beyond our imagination each day and at the end of our days.

Embrace Jesus' command: "strive first God and all these things will be given to you. Do not worry about tomorrow...today is enough for today."

All honor and glory to Jesus, our savior. Amen.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org