

Why Worry?
Gates Presbyterian Church
Sunday, May 25, 2008
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Isaiah 49:8-16a and Matthew 6:24-34

“Good, only 96.”

The volunteer behind the desk at Strong Memorial Hospital was puzzled. “Only 96? I am confused, ... what does that have to do with your parishioner being on the sixth floor in the 1400 wing?”

What? I looked back at the man, oh, “96 I was worried it would be 136.”

“136?”

George (-----) has been on the fifth floor, the sixth floor and the eighth floor. I was worried that he was back on the eighth floor and there are 136 steps to the eighth floor in the stairwell next to the red elevators. Being on the sixth floor means it is only 96 steps.

Slowing nodding his head in understanding what the nitwit in front of him was saying, the volunteer could only say: “I see.”

So I climbed the 96 steps and then I was worried that the volunteer would think that the only advantage I saw to George being on the sixth floor was that I had fewer steps to climb instead of the reality that the eighth floor means ICU and the sixth floor meant George was doing better.

That about which we worry!

On Friday afternoon, I was sitting in the living room of a member of the congregation and somewhere in the middle of the conversation we spoke about a *real* worry – how a neighbor whose mother died just a month ago was dealing with the reality that a sister had just been presented with rather dire medical news.

Our Gospel Lesson and the one from Isaiah suggest we not worry as we so often do. Are we not reminded of all the little quips and lines about not worrying? One commentator points out that when someone’s response to our worry is “Don’t worry” that it is little more than a throw-away line, that it probably means the person is a bad listener or worse, really doesn’t care about what is on our mind and heart and soul. The other quip is: “Don’t stay up all night worrying. Turn your worries over to God. God is up all night anyway!” At least that line has more validity and reminds us to turn our worries, anxieties and concerns over to God. As another put it:

What matters most (in this reading from Matthew 6) is what Jesus says about God. Jesus reminds us that if it is anyone’s job to worry, it is God’s. God worries in a way that catches everything: the birds, the lilies, the feeding of the world. We can worry or we can not worry. But God is on the job.

I want to return to what was said from this lectern just under three weeks ago when Arun Gandhi stood here and spoke about more than non-violence. Quoting his grandfather, Mahatma Gandhi, he reminded us that anger is like electricity – that it is a reality about which we can choose its application. If anger leads us to retaliate or ratchet something upwards into a confrontation, we have failed to use anger productively. If, on the other hand, we take that anger and step back and try to determine the source, the cause – and, at a minimum, tone down the potential conflict, then we have turned that anger, which is a real emotion, into something that can be positive if not productive.

I contend that how we deal with worry and anxiety mirrors that contention of Mr. Gandhi. One member of the group that met this past Wednesday for Bible Study, called worry that takes hold of one's soul “fretting.” To fret implies that a worry has become all consuming, all engaging, to the point that little positive can evolve.

Another example and I confess this kind of wisdom is not common for me – but perhaps was in this instance because, as ever, I was compiling and editing this sermon in my head all week. Yesterday afternoon, Sally and I were on a hilly, somewhat narrower than usual two-lane road. A larger vehicle than our Matrix came up behind me. In the rear view mirror, I could see that the lady was on her cell phone and it was quite clear that she was in a hurry and that she saw our Toyota as a hindrance to where she wanted to be when. The image of Arun Gandhi standing right here and today's Gospel lesson flooded my brain. There are occasions like this when my heart races. I worry that the cell phone using person will cause an accident and all kinds of negative scenarios flood my being. Sometimes, my reaction is to just keep on driving, admittedly just at or a tad over the speed limit. I recall times when my reaction would be to slow down – with the intended purpose to frustrate the person behind me – as though I could teach the person a lesson. So, yesterday, my behavior – this one time – was better. I put my right turn signal on, slowed down, pulled to the shoulder, let the impatient person go by, turned my left turn signal on, pulled back into the lane and proceeded on our way. This morning, as I completed a final edit to this text, I recalled with some chagrin that on previous occasions when I have pulled over to let some obnoxious person go by, that I would then undo the gracious response by laying on the horn, blinking the high beams, or worse, jumping up on the rear end of the offending person's car.

In that instance, I turned worry about a potential accident into something more productive. Perhaps there is even a 1% chance that in my actions, the lady realized what she had been doing or at least how her behavior was perceived and thought better of what she might do the next time she came upon a slowpoke!

Our faith is grounded in reality. We are not to pretend that temptations aren't real or that anger, worry and anxiety will simply evaporate in the presence of true and abiding faith. We are not naïve nor invited to be so. People worry about money – the cost of food and the cost of fuel for their cars. Others worry about the cost of college tuition, how they will pay the rent or mortgage, or how a retirement fund is doing. To that, our faith, grounded in our embrace of the Person and Way of Jesus the Christ, suggests we “shift our perspective” to giving thanks for what we do have, finding ways to improve the circumstances of those whose worries are far more dire

- How *will* we get supplies to the people of Myanmar when that nation's leaders won't let the world help?

- As we prepare to listen to our New Orleans Mission Team in today's Second Hour program, how can we turn worry about the slow recovery of that city and the need for communities in the mid-west devastated by tornadoes – how can we turn that worry into productive mission and ministry?
- Is there anything we can do to assist the people of China as they face crises after the earthquake that devastated their land not only leaving millions homeless, but now there is the threat of 69 dams bursting – and when I went to internet this morning to confirm the number of dams – because I had reversed the digits 6 and 9 – had it as 96 dams and 69 steps to the sixth floor of Strong – the news was of a powerful aftershock – 5.6 on the Richter scale usually qualifies as a full-fledged earthquake – and the further news, this morning is that the “death toll from the quake rose to 62,664, with another 23,775 people missing.
- How do we, on a Memorial Day Weekend, recall the sacrifice of so many during the course of so many wars, and move from worry on behalf of those serving in harm's way in the here and now to faithful recognition of how men and women are willing to sacrifice so much on our behalf. The numbers are daunting: on average, twelve hundred WWII veterans die every single day in this nation. They are joined by nearly 600 veterans of the Korea and Vietnam conflicts. Pause for a moment and try to comprehend the number! In 2007, 686,000 – six hundred and eighty-six thousand – veterans died in the United States. Add to that the number of soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen who didn't return from our wars – and does that not challenge us all the more to find ways of peace?

We know how lengthy a litany like that could be – and we are smart enough to realize that the answer isn't to simply throw up ones hands in resignation *or* suggest that God will take care of everything. This hardly suggests that I have good answers to the world's problems or the personal issues that cause people to worry – but I can suggest that we, that is all of us, be creative listeners, caring listeners, ... listeners to others and to the still small voices inside our own souls that invite us to be creative in our responses, caring in our outpouring of love and affection and stewardship of all that we are.

For the last month, I have faced another worry. I knew I would be a principal speaker at the Memorial Day events at Genesee Country Museum tomorrow. I also knew my uniform was, for some odd reason, not fitting as it once did. Instead of worrying, that is the kind of fretting that in my case means I eat *more instead of less*, I should have spent more time climbing the 136 steps to the eighth floor of Strong Memorial Hospital or more time on my recumbent tricycle with John Rooker or more time hiking or kayaking with Sally – or, at a minimum, eating less. The solution for tomorrow is less than ideal. I have borrowed a larger uniform, but I do that with little satisfaction and with the realization how I need to practice what I preach.

But do we not all hear that invitation – to turn our worries over to a conversation with our God, Who, through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, invites us to turn worry into change, concern into action, fretting into reprioritizing what is important? Finally, do we not know in the depth of our souls that in all things, God never stops loving us, never stops seeking us, never stops inviting us to be a people of redemption, a people of faith, and a people of hope? ...

Amen.