

Don't Worry ... Be Happy

February 27, 2011

Isaiah 49:8-16a Psalm 131 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 Matthew 6:24-34

You remember the song, don't you? "Don't worry, be happy."

Ain't got no place to lay your head
Somebody came and took your bed
Don't worry, be happy
The landlord say your rent is late
He may have to litigate
Don't worry, be happy

It was cute. It was catchy. It was pretty much meaningless.

And sometimes offensive! Isn't it infuriating when you're really upset about a problem in your life ... or depressed for no reason you can even figure out ... and someone says, "Oh, don't worry, be happy!" Aiee! I have nothing against smiley faces and cute little reggae songs, but they're not always appropriate.

Because, honestly, being told to be happy when you're not just isn't helpful. And it leads to the kind of pretending that isn't very healthy for us—the kind that says we should never let anyone see any of our weaknesses ... that our wounds shouldn't show. *Who, me worried? Of course not, everything's just fine. Just fine.* Until we explode, or implode, and everyone says, "Gee, we didn't notice there was anything wrong at all!" Not healthy.

So what, then, are we to do with this passage from Matthew?

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 God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew *seems* to be saying almost exactly "Don't worry, be happy"? The text *seems* to say, "Look, all you have to do is get right with God, and your life will be perfect, with nothing to worry about."

I was talking a few months ago with a young man I know who mentioned a friend of his who had fallen away from the church. "He got discouraged when all the problems in his life—his alcoholism, his failed relationships, his spotty job history—when they didn't clear up once he became a Christian." This young man and I agreed that churches do people a disservice when they tell them that being Christian makes your problems go away.

For all of us can testify that being Christians, being people who do truly strive after God, doesn't keep us from hard times. Alcoholism, child abuse, divorce ... cancer, depression, financial calamity ... children who stray, parents who deteriorate: Christians' lives are not perfect lives.

If what Matthew were saying was that becoming followers of God would take away any worries we might have, then the evidence of our own lives would tell us that Matthew was wrong.

Unless ... and here's the thinking that we sometimes use here, *maybe it's just that we're not good enough Christians. If we truly and completely followed God's will all the time, then our lives would be perfect. If that young man had only given the church a little more time, then all the problems in his life would have cleared up.*

But let me ask you this: Did Jesus ever set up some kind of hierarchy in which there were believers who got it all right and were therefore rewarded completely, while believers who tended to slip-slide away got only part of the blessings? Not at all. James and John were angling for that kind of hierarchy when they asked to be seated at Jesus' right hand when he came into his kingdom, but Jesus made it clear that that wasn't going to happen. And on the cross he looked at a man who had been the worst kind of thief—definitely not someone who had been a perfect believer—and Jesus assured the thief that that very day he would be in paradise.

So no. If you've fallen victim to the kind of thinking that tells you that your life *would* be worry free if only you were a better Christian, let that go. It's not scriptural.

What is scriptural is this passage from Matthew.

Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. ... Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?

...

Do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and God's 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.

Did you notice the number of times the word *worry* showed up? "Do not worry ... do not worry ... do not worry." The Greek word there is *merimnao*, and its sense is one of *being preoccupied with* or *absorbed by*. That's a little different from our usual sense of *worry*, as in fret, stew, be anxious. So let's try that again:

Do not preoccupy yourself with what you will eat and what you will drink. Do not let your life be absorbed with the question of what you will wear.

Jesus is not saying, "Don't worry, be happy." Jesus is saying, "Don't focus your life entirely on your tangible possessions. Instead, focus on God and God's righteousness, God's justice." Choose God and God's justice as your focus rather than your tangible possessions. He's saying again what he said at the beginning of the passage: "No one can serve two masters. ... You cannot serve God and wealth." (Wealth is a translation of *mammon*, the Aramaic word for tangible possessions—homes and clothing and food and drink.)

Just like the culture of first-century Palestine, our culture today tells us loudly that we should focus on mammon. Have you looked at a bridal registry recently? I checked one from Bed, Bath & Beyond. Here's what every bride and groom need, just in the area of "kitchen electrics": stand mixer, hand mixer, food processor, blender, coffeemaker, coffee grinder, espresso machine, toaster oven, toaster, waffle maker, juice extractor, ice cream maker, slow cooker, rice cooker, grilling machine, and deep fryer. And that's just one of 25 categories of "must haves"!

Now, Jesus is not saying that we don't need mixers and coffee makers and toasters ... or blankets or wastebaskets or suitcases or shower curtain rings ... or cars or houses or (gasp) even boats! "It is the Gentiles [the world in general] who strive for all these things," Jesus says, "and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things."

But don't make them the focus of your life. Don't serve mammon. Don't become a slave to the *things* in your life.

Instead, serve God. "Strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness," Jesus says.

There are a couple of ways we can read that. The first is that the kingdom of God is our eternal life, and God's righteousness is our "being right with God." If we read it that way, it means we should behave ourselves and do everything we can to make sure we have a relationship with God—come to church, pray, read the Bible. Those are all good things to do—as your pastor, I highly recommend them.

But the second way we can understand Jesus' command to "strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness" is that the kingdom of God is here and now, the kingdom that God is creating on earth, in Port Clinton and Marblehead and Washington, in Cairo and Tripoli and Beijing and Christchurch. And God's righteousness is God's justice. Justice for all God's people. And so if we are to strive for the kingdom of God and God's righteous justice, our focus must be not on ourselves. Not on our tangible possessions or on our own spiritual lives but on justice for all of God's children.

How do we do that? Many ways. We can start with ecological justice—are we recycling, are we using compact fluorescent light bulbs instead of incandescent ones, are we conserving gas by carpooling when possible? We can think about political justice—do we take the time to contact our elected representatives when we're concerned that a particular issue will impact disenfranchised people? Or maybe nutritional justice—how can we ensure that everyone in this county has affordable access to healthy food?

“No one can serve two masters. ... Strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness.” God’s righteousness is justice for not just ourselves and our own families but all God’s people.

Strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s justice for all, and all the things you need will be given to you as well.

Serve God, and trust God. Make God’s kingdom your focus.

And then? Then you’ll be happy.