



“Can any of you by worrying ...?”

Sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on the Second Sunday after Pentecost, May 25, 2008 at Christ Church, Detroit. RCL Readings: Isaiah 49:8-16a; Psalm 131; I Corinthians 4:1-5; and Matthew 6:24-34.

“Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” It is as great a question today as it was when Jesus posed it 2,000 years ago. Does worrying do us any good?

I would guess that some of us have put *vast* quantities of time and energy into worrying about all sorts of things that *could* happen, but only rarely come to pass. We might also say that over the past two thousand years life has been generous in providing humankind with an endless supply of possible problems over which to fret.

Now, after two thousand years of worry, what do we have to show for it? Have we, as Jesus asked, added even a single hour to our lives? It appears to be a rhetorical question to which his audience would reply with a resounding “No.” But who knows and how might we find out? Well, we might try the scientific method. And it happens that that has been done, with the results published in the December 2006 issue of the medical journal *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*. The study’s conclusion suggests that Jesus was right. But even more, it reveals that *not* being a chronic worrier can add not only an hour, but perhaps even *years* to your lifespan.

It all began back in the mid-60s when some 7,000 students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill took the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, a test that, among other things, measured the participants’ tendency to be optimistic or pessimistic. Of that group, 1,630 were found by the test to be clearly pessimists and 923 to be clearly optimists. The rest fell somewhere in-between. Over the next four decades, 476 of the participants died from causes

ranging from accident to illness to suicide to homicide.

By tracking and collating the information, researchers found that the pessimists had a significantly greater likelihood of dying *sooner* from any cause than did the optimists. As the report puts it, "... those who scored as pessimistic had decreased rates of longevity compared with optimistic individuals." It also said, "The current results replicate, in a non-medical sample, those of [earlier studies] that suggest that optimism is associated with increased survival."

So, worrying isn't likely to add so much as an hour to your life.

In the middle of the night in New York City's South Bronx a couple of carefree college students in an ancient car had a flat tire.

Before they could open the trunk to see if they even had a spare, an even older, rustier car pulled to a halt blocking them in the breakdown lane. In a flash, out climbed two very large men speaking Spanish. The students were paralyzed. But before they had a chance to decide whether to scream for help or to run for their lives, the two men started changing the tire. They were done in minutes.

As they started to leave, the hapless students tried to pay them. The two men paid no attention, walked away, got into their car, and drove off.

In today's gospel Jesus makes clear that he is calling us to trust God. He pointed to the birds that do not sow or reap the fields but are fed by God nonetheless. He pointed to the flowers that do not toil or spin but are clothed in beauty by their Creator anyway. Jesus was speaking to people who *did* have to sow, reap, toil and spin, and he wasn't telling them to stop doing those things; he simply wanted them to understand that their lives were much more than the sum of them.

For Jesus God's realm is the ultimate reason for optimism and hope. In the reign of God, right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. If you are a citizen of God's realm it's still possible that you might be pessimistic about human activity in the short term, but optimistic about God's activity in the long term. So by bringing the realm of God into the discussion, Jesus reminds us that in the longest haul, we who follow him have nothing to worry about. This not a

dissertation on worry though. Jesus is not Dr. Phil giving us advice on how to avoid anxiety. The point Jesus makes is: “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” *Strive* is the operative word.

“Strive” means to exert energy and effort toward a goal. Jesus doesn’t say we can just sit down on our baptisms and put our feet up. Jesus is urging us to work for the spread of God’s reign. And as we do, much of our worrying will disappear because we will have more important things to occupy us. But we can be focused enough on the things of God that we’re able to relax about our priorities and have trust in God’s providential care.

In Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, there is a wonderful scene where Celie, a battered and depressed woman, married to a brutal and sadistic husband, meets Shug Avery, a sultry, free-wheeling songstress. In a long conversation about God, Shug Avery introduces Celie to spirit, an introduction which eventually leads to Celie's personal liberation.

Here's the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into this world with God. But only them that search for it find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think...

It? I ast.

Yeah, it. God ain't a he or a she, but a it.

But what it look like? I ast.

Don't look like nothin, she say. It ain't a picture show. It aint something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it... Listen, God love everything you love - and a mess of stuff you don't, but more than anything else, God love admiration.

You saying God vain? I ast.

Naw, she say. Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it [ticks] God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.

What it do when it [ticked] off? I ast.

Oh, it make something else. People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back.

Yeah? I say.

Yeah, she say. It always making little surprises and springing them on us when we least expect.

You mean it want to be loved, just like the Bible say.

Yes, Celie, she say. Everything want to be loved. Us sing and dance, make faces and give bouquets, trying to be loved. You ever notice that trees do everything to git attention we do, except walk?

Dr. Edward Hallowell is a psychologist who taught at Harvard and left academia to devote his attention to his clinical practice, lectures and the writing of books. In the 1990s, he was the one who brought Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) to the public's awareness, but he's also made a study of worry, which is the subject of one of his books.

Writing about worry for *Psychology Today* magazine, he offered several suggestions for dealing with excessive worry, but finally he said: "Talk to God when you feel worried.... Brain scans and EEG monitors show beneficial changes in the brain during meditation and prayer. The changes correlate with most of our measures of improved health, *including longevity* and reduced incidence of illness" (emphasis added).

You cannot add to your lifespan by worrying, but you likely will when you are open to the divine optimism that flows from the realm of God. It's power flows back to us in the present in the form of great confidence in God, and energy to work for the advance of God's reign.

Sources:

Brummett, Beverly H., Michael J. Helms, W. Grant Dahlstrom, Ilene C. Siegler. "Prediction of all-cause mortality by the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory optimism-pessimism scale scores: study of a college sample during a 40-year follow-up period." *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, December 2006, 1541-1544.

Hallowell, Edward H. "Fighting life's 'What ifs.'" *Psychology Today*, November-December 1997.

"Weaving a web of life: A talk with Edward Hallowell, M.D." *Psychology Today*, November-December 1997. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker