

Sermon Series on "The Joy Stealers"

January 6 – Epiphany - Worry

Matthew 6:25-34

Today we begin a series all about Joy. I read a book "The Joy Stealers" by Rob Renfroe this summer. It challenged me as I realized that we all allow life to steal from us joy. I want you to hear and remember one thing. It is the most important thing in this whole series. God's will for you is Joy. By Joy, I mean a sense of well-being and peace that is not dependent on external factors. Too often we believe that something good has to happen for us to feel joy, or we have to get beyond this crisis to feel joy, or we need to get over this current loss to feel joy. These thoughts are all stealers of the joy God offers you, no matter what you are currently experiencing. Let me say it again in another way: God's desire for you is to have a sense of confidence and encouragement that transcends your situation. You can feel peace and joy always, because it is founded on your relationship with God. Jesus taught this truth when he said, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." John 15:11. Jesus came to help us find joy and it comes through faithfully following his word for our lives.

We all view life differently. One person said it this way: "Some people see the glass half full. Others see it half-empty. Some wonder who's been drinking out of my glass?" When it comes to the joy you were meant to experience, does it ever feel like someone or something has been drinking out of your glass? Worry, bitterness, negativity, busyness and guilt, will all steal our joy if we let them. Joy is a decision. We need to remember that in Christ, we have everything we need for joy. Joy is different from happiness. Joy is that awareness that God loves us and because of that, life is good and we are at peace because we trust God.

It is hard to live always with joy. Too often we let something take it from us. We need to realize that to live with joy is a choice each of us makes. Often choosing joy is not easy. What makes it even more difficult is that it is a decision we must make over and over. We are going to look at five things that try to steal our joy. We can make the decision to not let that happen. It is hard to do. Most require self-understanding, a

commitment to personal responsibility and a process of emotional and spiritual growth. The good news is that with God's help we can do this.

The first joy stealer we are going to talk about is worry. Why do we worry? It is because life places terrible burdens on us and makes no promises that the worst will not happen. We become anxious and stressed and we wonder how we will ever experience a moment of peace, much less joy. Some of us are anxious by nature. It seems as if we are wired to see the worst in every situation.

The Anglo Saxon root for worry means "to strangle." And that is what worry does. It chokes the life out of us. It strangles our ability to make good decisions. Anxiety and worry can cause physical symptoms. It can make us physically sick. It can also make us spiritually sick. It can cause us to lose sight of God and see nothing but problems. When we are under stress, we can find the scripture we read today to be challenging, if not scolding. It can cause us guilt, another joy stealer!

It is easy to misunderstand the scripture we read today. Jesus is not saying that we won't or shouldn't have concerns about situations that can affect us mightily. It is not saying that we don't need to plan ahead. Worrying about something and making plans for the future are two very different things. What Jesus is saying is that worry will strangle our spirits and steal our joy. Even more, Jesus is promising that there is a better way to go through life than being wracked with anxiety and fear. No matter what we are facing, worry is not the only solution.

In this scripture Jesus gives us three descriptions of worry and with each description he gives us a prescription for overcoming anxiety and living with joy. The first thing Jesus says is that when we worry it is a faith issue. If God provides for all of God's creation how much more certain you can be that God will take care of your needs. He said, "Oh you of little faith." We need to hear that when we worry it is because our faith has become small. For many, if you don't worry it means you don't care. Jesus says if you are excessively worried it is because you don't trust God. I use that word excessively because I don't think any of us can totally escape feelings of worry when we are blindsided by some of the events of life.

So, how do you grow your faith so it isn't so small? How do you find peace in the midst of travail? How can you experience joy when life is anything but joyful? Jesus tells you how in this scripture.

The best way to overcome a negative habit, in this case worry, is with a positive and healthy habit. The prescription for small faith is to remind yourself who God is. Jesus says in this passage that God is your heavenly Father/Mother. You are valuable to God. God loves you. That is the truest truth about you—not what you have done, not the mistakes you have made, not what your past says about you, not the names that others have placed on you. And because God loves you, God will provide for you. Think about children. Unless the situation is extremely dire for them, a child never worries about being taken care of. They trust that there will be food, clothes, and shelter. Jesus says to focus on God, the loving parent. Look at nature to see how God cares for what God created. You are part of that! Believe it.

You might be sitting there thinking, this all sounds fine and good, but how do we find that trust when life is making us anxious? Jesus says, focus on God. If you focus on your problems, become obsessed with the bad news that surrounds you, and lift your eyes no higher than your circumstances, you will walk through life defeated and despairing. But if you focus on God and God's promises you will find peace and be able to overcome anxiety. Focusing on God reminds you that there is something bigger than your problem. It does not mean that the problem will resolve. It means you find peace because you have friends in high places helping you!

The second thing Jesus says about worry is that it is foolishness. If worry can't add something as small as sixty minutes to our lives, why would you think it could help you with anything that is substantive and important? Has worry every solved a problem or healed a hurt, created a solution or given birth to hope? No. Prayer has, seeking wise counsel has, Godly planning has, but never worry. Worry is trying to be in control when we are powerless to change things. Worry is trying to maintain the illusion that if we just hold on to the problem a little longer then we will be able to create a new outcome.

So what is Jesus' prescription? It is prayer. When we pray we acknowledge that we are not in control and ask God to take over. This is, in part, what it means to seek God's

kingdom and righteousness. Prayer is both an admission that life is bigger than we are and a declaration that God is bigger than life. The prayer that brings peace and joy is not about turning bad luck into good or convincing God to give us what we think will be good for us. The prayer that leads to joy is a humble admission that we can't predict or control what is going to happen. We turn it over to God in trust. Often those who are most wounded and broken inside are the ones who insist that they can handle life on their own and refuse to acknowledge they need the help that only God can give.

Prayer that acknowledges how small and powerless we are, but dares to trust in the kindness and power of God, has the opposite effect of worry on our lives. It sets us free to do what we can do as we leave the rest to God, knowing some things are out of our hands.

When you go to God in prayer and place in God's hands your to-do list of what needs to be done, when it needs to be done, and how it needs to be done, that is not prayer. That is worrying in the presence of God. The prayer that brings peace and the possibility of joy asks God to change what is going on in us more than what is going on around us. You know you are letting go and trusting when you end the prayers more at peace, more filled with joy than when you began. If you are still as worried at the end you are not letting go.

Finally Jesus tells us that worry leads to defeat. Spend your time worrying about the future and you will fail in the present. Be anxious about tomorrow and you won't be able to handle today, Jesus says. God gives us the strength we need to face our problems one day at a time. When we worry about the future, we give today's strength to tomorrow's fears. Anxiety does not empty tomorrow of its problems but empties today of its strength.

Do what you can today and leave the rest to God. Our main business is not to see what lies dimly at a distance but to do what lies clearly at hand. People free from anxiety are not people who are free of problems or who can see the future. They are people who make decisions and act. They determine what they can do today and do it now. They leave the rest to God. You then need to give yourself permission to let go of it for the day and leave the rest with God. Do the most positive things you can for yourself.

The author tells the story about his friend Danny. Danny is one of the most positive and joy-filled people he knows. One day in talking with him he learned that Danny's life was filled with tragedy. His father had been killed in an accident when he was young. His sister had disappeared never to be heard from again. His mother died of a botched operation. He had lost a granddaughter to a rare disease when she was two and his wife was suffering from cancer. When asked, having been through so much tragedy, how he could live such a joy-filled existence he said, "I decided a long time ago that I wasn't going to let anything take away the joy that is mine in Jesus Christ."

We will hear those three words over and over in this series, "I have decided." Today, when worry comes at you choose not to be afraid. Choose not to live with anxiety. You do not have to carry the weight or fight the battle by yourself. Choose to trust. Choose to know you can handle what today brings and let go of the rest. Doing so will destroy worry. For trust in God, living in God's love is what God wishes for all of us.