

WORRIED AND DISTRACTED

Sermon for Pentecost 9C-Lk 10:38-42

LPC, 7/21/13

Stand next to me long enough and, after I tell you about my terrific family, I'm likely, sooner or later, mention a person whose influence on my life is hard to overestimate. Her name was Ellin and she was my parish priest in the 1990's. She was also my friend, my confidant, and my mentor. It was Ellin who saw in me a possible call to ordination. If it hadn't been for Ellin I might not be here, serving the church as a parish priest in my own right.

In 1995, Ellin had her first bout with the lung cancer that eventually took her life. After the diagnosis, she had surgery and then radiation and was cancer-free for two years. But here is the remarkable thing: she told me that as she was preparing for the operation, she was struck forcibly with the truth of Romans 14: "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." She said that all worry left her at that point. Furthermore, the effect was permanent. She told me after that she never worried about anything ever again.

She may as well have told me that she grew a foot by force of will. The idea of never worrying about anything is almost unthinkable. We all know a very few exceptionally serene people who don't worry about much, but the idea of never worrying about anything seems unattainable, almost inhuman.

It's human nature to worry, isn't it? Now some of us have reached a certain degree of wisdom in that we don't worry much about ourselves, but is it possible not even to worry about people you love? Parents *always* worry about their children, don't they? It doesn't matter if they're seven hours old or seventy-seven years old.

Still, it's fairly clear from the Bible that God intends for God's people not to worry. We have the story of Martha of Bethany today, where Martha is chided for being worried and distracted, but there are other texts. There's the famous "Lilies of the Field" lesson from the Gospel of Matthew: "Which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life?" And there are all kinds of texts urging faithfulness, trust in God and placing your treasure in heaven, where thieves cannot break in and steal.

We may as well call the proverbial spade a spade. Worry is a form of fear. If we recognize that, there are even more relevant biblical texts: "Fear not," says God to Joshua before the walls of Ai. "Fear not," says the Lord through the prophet Isaiah to the people of Israel as they face their enemies. "Fear not," says Gabriel to Mary the Virgin. "Fear not," say the angels to the shepherds on the hillside. "There is no fear in love," says John in his first letter. Fear not, fear not, *fear not!*

We are told again and again that followers of Jesus have nothing to fear, nothing to worry about. It certainly does not speak well for our faith when we worry. Nevertheless, though we want to be followers of Jesus, we all worry.

Wretched humans that we are, what can we do?

I'm reminded of an old Bob Newhart sketch that is still circulating on YouTube. Newhart plays a psychiatrist. A young woman comes to see him with an unreasonable fear of being buried alive in a box. Newhart tells her he can cure her in five minutes in two words. After she describes her fear, he simply says, "Stop it!" So, if you want to be a follower of Jesus, and find yourself being worried and distracted, "Stop it!"

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In case the Newhart treatment doesn't work for you, we have another option to curb our reflexive worrying: the Bible.

This is an example of something the Bible is really good for, and why it is important to keep reading the Bible. Many Bible stories can be used quite profitably as a basis for prayer in the case of intractable problems like worrying.

The technique is simple: in your imagination, you place yourself in the company of Jesus in the context of a Gospel story you know. We can use the Martha-Mary story this way. When you find yourself worried and distracted like Martha, imagine yourself sitting at the feet of Jesus like Mary. Imagine your conversation. Imagine what Jesus would say to you. Imagine what would be so appealing to you that you would leave your mountains of work and gladly take the time to just sit. Stop doing so much and just be, for a few minutes. Stop giving so much and just receive.

Like many of these so-called "guided" meditations, this one can be adapted into intercessory prayer (prayer you make on behalf of another person.) If you're worried *about* another person, imagine bringing that person to Jesus to sit at Jesus' feet and listen. Imagine making the introductions and then stepping back. This time the conversation is between Jesus and the individual you have brought to prayer. You may or may not be part of this conversation.

In either scenario, when the conversation has run its course, draw it to an appropriate conclusion. Say good-bye. And give thanks.

Trust in God. Fear not. Pray always. Give thanks. Whatever you do, don't worry.