

The Reverend John E. McGinn, Rector  
Saint John's Episcopal Church  
Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

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Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany

Today's sermon is taken from Mathew, chapter 6, verses 24-34.

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen*

I know it's no surprise to any of you that I am a Red Sox fan, and I am already worrying about the Red Sox and wondering if they are going to in fact make the playoffs, and is it possible that this year we could win another world series: because everything is so optimistic on one side as we sign these wonderful players, and we have these wonderful pitchers, but I still worry.

What do you do with people who worry? Some people can see the dark side of any cloud, even one with a silver lining. They are worriers. They fume, they fret, they stay stressed out. Do they ever read the words of Jesus from today's gospel? "Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his or her life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow; they do not labor or spin, yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you -- oh you of little faith? So do not worry saying what shall we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we wear, for the pagans run after these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well."

From reading this, I'm tempted to declare that it is a sin to worry. However, if I did that I would just give some of you and myself one more thing to worry about. I'll say this: You put a terrible burden upon yourself when you cannot

relax and trust in God.

A word that is often used in our society is not worry, but its sister emotion: stress. A lecturer was explaining stress management to his audience. He raised a glass of water and asked, "How heavy is this glass of water?" Answers called out ranged from ten ounces to sixteen ounces. The lecturer replied, "The absolute weight doesn't matter. It depends on how long you try to hold it. If I hold it for a minute, that's not a problem. If I hold it for an hour, I'll have a ache in my right arm. If I hold it for a day, you'll have to call an ambulance. In each case, it's the same weight, but the longer I hold it, the heavier it becomes." He continued, "And that's the way it is with stress management. If we carry our burdens all the time, sooner or later as the burden becomes increasingly heavy, we won't be able to carry on. As with the glass of water, you have to put it down for a while and rest before holding it again. When we're refreshed, we can carry on with the burden. So before you return home tonight," said the lecturer, "put the burden of your work down; don't carry it home. You can pick it up tomorrow. Whatever burdens you are carrying now, let them be a down payment for a moment if you can. Let them down, relax, put them up later after you've rested. Life is short. Enjoy it."

Before we seek a remedy for worry and stress, however, there are some things I think we need to understand about these powerful and destructive forces. First of all, many of us have a susceptibility to stress and worry built into our personalities. Many of us inherited a susceptibility to worry. We got it from our parents; I don't mean that it's genetic necessarily although there might be indeed a genetic component to it. I mean that some of us had parents who were not able, for one reason or another, to give us an emotionally secure environment during our formative years.

This is what we learned from the highly respected psychologist, Erik Erikson. He taught that during the first stages of our life, we either develop a sense of trust or a sense of mistrust about our environment; and throughout our lives how we respond to life will be affected by which of these emotions dominates our life: trust or mistrust. Dr. Erikson held that the conflict between trust and mistrust arises in the very first stage of a child's development. Successful resolution of this conflict depends largely on the infant's relationship with the primary caregiver.

Let's say, for example, that our caregiver is by nature a person who is not able to express warmth and nurture. Many parents are unable to express

unconditional love because they did not receive unconditional love when they were young. We're not blaming anybody; we're simply stating a fact. Some parents are emotionally limited themselves, so they could not provide us with a secure sense of the world. "If we encounter trust during our infancy," says Dr. Erikson, "the stage is set for a life-long perception of the world as a good and pleasant place; but if our caregiver wasn't emotionally adept at expressing warmth and love, then it's likely we grow up to be mistrustful and insecure. Many of us have a susceptibility to stress and worry built into our varied personalities."

And on top of that, modern life has many built-in stressors. Some of us have very successful jobs, very stressful jobs. Some of us have family situations that are stressful. Some of us may have medical conditions that we worry about. Some of us may have family members who we worry about. Life has many built-in stressors -- stress, anxiety, depression, insomnia, suicide and other signs of insecurity. Tension and hopelessness have become shockingly commonplace in our modern world.

According to pollster Louis Harris, ninety percent of all adult Americans, a substantial one hundred and fifty-eight million people, report experiencing high stress, and as many as six in every ten reporting had great stress at least once or twice every week.

I was reading an interesting study by the American Medical Association about the stress put on young doctors because of excessive work hours. This study says that such stress is not safe for young doctors or their patients. And doctors are not the only people who are working longer hours nowadays. One reason corporations are not hiring like they once were is that corporations have grown accustomed to getting more and more work out of employees they already have; and this takes a toll on their employees. We've never seen housing collapse as it has in the past couple of years. Owning your own home has always been considered a keen element of the American dream, but not anymore. Its tough all over.

Some of us are especially susceptible to stress, and modern life has many built-in stressors. But here is what I think is the good news of the day: The best cure for worry and stress is to trust God completely. Jesus reminds us that God provides for the birds of the air. "They do not sow or reap or store away in barns," said Jesus, "and yet your heavenly Father feeds them." Then he asked a very powerful question: "Are you not much more valuable than

they?” And the answer is: Yes, you are much more valuable than they.

Marion Vuilleumier, in her book *Meditations by the Sea*, gives several examples of how God has provided for God’s creations. She notes that some birds migrate thousands of miles across empty oceans. Some of these birds, like gulls and sea ducks, can rest on the ocean surface storing energy for further flights. Their feathers contain an ointment that protects them from the wet and cold, but there are other winged creatures that fly over vast stretches of the ocean with seemingly no place to break their journey. One example is the monarch butterfly. The monarch is the only butterfly known to make a two-way migration as birds do. In summer you can find monarchs in northeastern climates like Newfoundland and New England. And I know all of you have seen the beauty of a monarch in your garden or in your yard. However, monarchs cannot survive cold winters. Somehow, God has made it possible for them to know when it’s time to travel south for the winter. Some fly as far as three thousand miles to reach their winter home in Mexico. In this astonishing annual pilgrimage, they fly around city buildings and over coastal waters. They stop briefly to feed on flowers when available, and they cluster at night in trees when they are over land. At sea, monarch butterflies rest on the mast of fishing boats. Only God know how they make this extraordinary journey safely.

According to *National Geographic*, tall ships are often a haven for birds in flight. Kevin Garrett who sailed from Poland to America during the bicentennial rendezvous of tall ships, wrote that a pair of doves came aboard briefly. Later a tiny wren alighted on his ankle and scurried up his trouser leg. The wren warmed and rested itself in his trouser leg for about forty-five minutes and then emerged and took off for shore. “The birds of the air do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?”

Do you understand how much God loves you? Friends, if you are one of those people who has difficulty with trust -- today -- today is the day to turn around. Relax. By the grace of God, you’re going to make it. Look at the birds up there.

*Amen*

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs