

Questions of Jesus
4. "Are you not of more value?"
Text: Matthew 6: 25-34

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Did you know that the longest discourse Jesus offered on any single human emotion was about worry? Worry in its persistent and pesky forms. And, by far! Not its close cousins stress or tension or anxiety, mind you; though these often come to us bundled and need untangling. But plain old worry.

Martin Copenhaver, President of Andover Newton Theological School, takes it another step. "It is particularly remarkable that Jesus devotes such attention to worry in light of all of the other possibilities. He could have talked most extensively on sadness or fear; grief or loneliness or shame. He could have talked at greater length about positive emotions like love, happiness or gratitude. And while it's true that he addresses all of these in his teachings, still the fact remains. His longest single discourse about any human emotion is reserved for worry."¹

One thing that tells us is that worry must have been as big an issue in first century Palestine as it is in twenty-first century West Hartford. Some things don't change all that much over time, and sometimes the more that things change the more they seem to stay the same.

The other day at the barbershop I came across an article ranking the top 20 things that men in contemporary culture worry about.² It was not in a scholarly magazine, but still, I was curious. The list: "Money. Children. Sex. Power. Winning. The well-being of the family after death. Bets. (Who'da'ever'thunk'it?) Body. Hair. (Yikes!) Different ways to make money. Eating. Bills. Getting old. Success. Job. The well-being of the family before death. Health. Respect. Legacy. And dying."

And, not to feel left out, "the top 10 things for women are: Children. Getting it all done. Current events. Germs. Appearance. Health. Work. Age. Home. And finances." I find it odd that the article noted 20 things for men and 10 for women – which could mean that men worry twice as much as women; or that women worry two times harder than men!

So hold such thoughts next to the list that Jesus gives us. He does not differentiate by gender, nor does he make the list long. People were worried about what to eat or drink; about their bodies and clothing. And so he cleverly called attention to this simplicity by actively blending devices of comparison and contrast, visualization, poetry and nature, and the use of rhetorical question! (He was such an amazing and creative teacher!)

An aside. Five hundred years ago the English language was nuanced a bit differently. There was actually a separate punctuation mark that distinguished rhetorical questions from normal everyday questions. It was an ordinary question mark turned around. That was because rhetorical questions are different than other questions. They are asked more to produce an effect than to summon an answer.³

And so in our passage for today Jesus asked rhetorical questions for effect. Imagine the reversed question mark. He posed five questions in rapid succession, not so much as allowing for a breath of response from his listeners. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Are you not of more value than the birds? Can any of you by worry add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? If God so clothes the grass of the field will he not much more clothe you?

His listeners must have been startled to a stop. And that's just exactly what he wanted them to do. We have no evidence that any one there that day tried to answer or to speak back. He was handing-off the hard work of wondering, discerning, reflecting within to each of them. He didn't expect that any of them needed to answer. Sometimes the best of teaching happens just like that.

And when they eventually came up for air and could begin to respond to such power-filled questions as the rhetorical method elicits, they might also have heard something deeper. Because this lesson of Jesus has a subtext to it. On the surface it sounds as if he is simply spinning around the subject of worry – and in particular, what we worry about. But the truth that lies beneath is that he was more concerned about the reason for our worry. It was the why of worry to him - and not the what of worry as it is to us.

Clear as a ray of morning light he was teasing their thoughts about where they placed their ultimate trust, and specifically, whether they trusted in God's providence. And all of his talk about the lilies of the field and the birds of the air with which he illustrates; all of the grasses and the fields in splendor; all of the inches added to life or taken away lead to this most important point. His real concern, then and now, was that we who are so very human let worry quickly supplant, displace and even distort the place of God in our lives.

"Today's trouble is enough for today! Do not worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Seek first God's realm and all the rest will follow. For God truly knows what you need."

My family and my friends. Listen! Please! This is so important a teaching of Jesus that it made it squarely into what is famously called the Sermon on the Mount – Matthew's summary of the ethical teachings of Jesus. And I can honestly think of no better words, no better questions (rhetorical or not), no better call-back to trusting in providence, no better summons to the things that matter most than to hold all of this in heart as we come to the table.

Come now for the food of our souls. The bread of life. The cup of love. And for now, for these moments let's put our trust where it serves deepest and best. Amen.

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¹ Martin Copenhaver. Jesus is the Question. Abingdon, 2014, p. 45.

² Homiletics. January 2015, p. 11.

³ Copenhaver, p. 48 - 49.