



## *Round Hill Community Church*

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**Sermon: June 13, 2010**

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### **Helpful Counsel from the Lord, Robert B. Culp**

Philippians 4:4-9; Matthew 6:25-34

The Apostle Paul's admonition for us not to "worry about tomorrow" seems a bit off the mark, doesn't it? Especially when you consider all that is happening in the world today – the stock market's volatility, a housing market that is struggling to wake up from its recessionary nightmares, financial icons that are in disrepute, ecological disasters unfolding along the Gulf Coast, and the unending political diatribes in Washington and in the world community that are interfering with the realization of the hopes and dreams of the human family in our global village. Sadly, the morning papers and CNN continue to deliver what seems like an endless stream of unsettling and disturbing news.

To all of this, the understandable personal response has been stress, anxiety, fear ... and a certain testiness and angst. A while back, a survey was conducted asking people how they were coping with stress: 36% are drinking alcohol, 26% are praying, and 25% are shopping.

Of course, stress comes from worrying about a future we cannot control. And we are very good at it, actually. Fred Buechner has observed that he can always imagine the worst that could possibly happen – a headache must mean a brain tumor is present; a teenager is late and so something terrible must have happened. Researchers have determined that there is "good" stress, the kind of stress that stimulates us to plan ahead, to be prepared, to save our money, and to take care of ourselves. But "chronic" stress is something else altogether. Because this kind of stress can be debilitating, paralyzing, and quite unhealthy.

Part of the dynamic of stress, as well as the problem, is that we have developed a wonderful system of physiological responses that enable us to respond immediately and efficiently to threat ... better known as the fight-or-flight syndrome. It allowed our ancestors to deal with threats by fighting them off or by fleeing. And it is an amazing system: the body goes on four-alarm, all-out alert; heart and lungs go into overdrive; arteries and capillaries expand; eyes widen; blood is diverted from digestion, which virtually stops, and is sent to the body's muscles.

It's a great system if you are under attack. But it's not so great if you are sitting in a traffic jam and you're late for an appointment, or if you're tracking the Dow Jones and watching your money and your future security take a hit.

Stress is quite high within our society, and as it causes harm to our health, it can damage the delicate balance needed by us in our daily living. It's serious business. So, when someone says to us, especially if it is the Apostle Paul, that we ought not worry about anything, we should probably pay attention and find out what is meant before we dismiss it as nothing more than pure silliness. Paul said, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

Now, as you may remember, Paul has a lot to worry about himself. He's in prison. He knows that he will never see his dear friends in the little Christian community in Philippi again. Rome, he suspects, will probably execute him, which is what happened. You might expect him to say near the end of the last letter he ever wrote, something like: "Get ready, be prepared, plan for your defense or escape. Something terrible may happen at any moment." Instead, though, he says, "Rejoice. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything."

In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus pretty much says the same thing: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, drink, or wear ... Look at the birds. Are you not of more value than they? Your father knows that you need all these things ... Strive first for the kingdom."

To begin with, it's important to note what this counsel does not mean. By all accounts, Paul was a high-energy, hard-working tent-maker, traveler, preacher, organizer. Paul was hardly nonchalant about the future. Jesus probably took over his father Joseph's building business and carpenter shop, and spent years providing for his mother and siblings. So, this counsel does not encourage lazy irresponsibility. Besides, look at the birds ... which we are doing more of since the arrival of several bird-feeders on campus. So far as I've been able to see, they seem to be busy all day long, taking care of business, along with the squirrels!

What Paul and Jesus mean is that it is such a sad and unhealthy waste of the precious gift of life for us to spend it being anxious, to be constantly worrying about things we cannot control – like the weather or the stock market or whether the Yankees and Mets win or lose. Such worrying, according to Barbara Brown Taylor, is a form of idolatry – giving our fears and anxieties the power and authority to shape who we are and to drive our behavior.

Because we have been created to be beloved and joyful children of God, it is a waste for us to become anxious, fearful worriers. What will save us, from the perspective of Jesus and Paul, is not our economic resources, our savings accounts and 401(k)s ... not our physical strength ... not our defense systems, fences and weapons ... not our hard work and frenetic ef-

forts. Those who are non-stop, 24/7 workaholics need to hear Jesus say, “These things will not save you or make you whole.” What will save us is God’s love – nothing but the love of God from which nothing can ever separate us.

There are coping mechanisms, of course, by which we try to embrace the truth of such counsel. Some years ago, Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard Medical School wrote a valuable little book he entitled *The Relaxation Response* that teaches the ancient practice of deep breathing as a way to counter stress. Nothing is really better than regular exercise, talking a walk or swim, to regularize breathing. And interestingly, Benson encourages the ancient Christian practice of a “breath prayer” ... on inhaling, to pray “Lord Jesus Christ,” and on exhaling, to pray “Have mercy upon me.” So if stress is consuming us, we would do well to breathe deeply, exercise, pray ... and do it all with thanksgiving, as the Apostle Paul advises. You see, what our faith teaches is a life-giving, life-saving reordering of priorities, and for us not to sweat the small stuff in life.

Kathy and our girls can tell you that when I get behind the wheel of the car, I can get stressed in traffic, especially when other drivers are rude and aggressive and downright reckless. And being stuck at a red light that is going on forever, especially when I am in a hurry, I am no treat to be around!

Recently, I was listening to an NPR segment that was an encore interview with Sarah Adams, who is an English Professor and who was reciting one of her pieces called “Be Cool to the Pizza Dude.” Part of it went like this: “Coolness to the pizza delivery dude is a practice in humility and forgiveness. I let him cut me off in traffic, let him safely hit the exit ramp from the left lane, let him forget to use his blinker without extending any of my fingers out the window – I let it go. After all, the dude is delivering pizza to young and old, families and singletons, gays and straights, blacks, whites and browns, rich and poor, vegetarians and meat lovers alike. As he journeys, I give him safe passage, practice restraint, show courtesy, and contain my anger.”

When you think of it, so much of that happens every day. It is an act of maturity and health and finally spiritual trust to let it go. It is an expression, I think at the deepest level, for us to stop worrying and trust God with our lives.

Bill Forbes, an ordained Presbyterian minister who served the denomination in a variety of ways for 37 years, died a year ago at age 62 from complications linked to pancreatic cancer ... with which he had lived and coped gallantly for three and a half years. When he was initially diagnosed with it, he was not expected to live very long, and he wrote a tender letter to his many friends in the Presbyterian denomination ... a letter conveying his hopes and deep faith, his appreciation for the gift of so many friendships, and his confidence of being held in the hands of God.

Two years later, Bill was still alive and met many of his friends at the General Assembly Meeting taking place. Blessed with a wonderful sense of humor, anticipating that many would be thinking, if not asking, “Are you still here?” he penned another letter which read in part, “My docs are baffled. I told them it was the power of prayer, reasonable eating habits, exercise, massage, a little snake oil here and there, and a wicked sense of humor. I didn’t expect to write another letter. What have I learned? Well ... Each day is a gift. The greatest gift we can give each other is encouragement. Don’t sweat the small stuff. And prayer shapes my life as never before.”

At the end of his letter, he became quite pastoral: “None of us knows how many days we will be granted. As you look in the mirror each day, take time to marvel that you have been created in the image of God, and that you are still here. Count your blessings. Smile more and frown less. Tell those you love how much you love them. Share your life abundantly – give thanks – keep a twinkle in your eye. And laugh.”

That sounds very similar to what Paul writes, doesn’t it? “Rejoice in the Lord always. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God.”

Sue Monk Kidd tells about once driving through the mountains of North Carolina, returning from an appointment, and she confesses she felt hurried and pressured by all the important stuff waiting back home for her attention. She writes, “Spotting a car stopped in the road ahead of me, I braked for it, fuming a little, wondering what the problem could be. Then I saw one of those huge, silent turtles crossing the road at an unbearably slow pace. So there we sat, waiting for this creature to pass.”

She continues, “I observed it casually at first, then with great and particular care, reflecting upon its movements and then upon my own. Why was I racing through life at breakneck speed? I looked from the turtle to the sweep of the mountains in the distance, to the rich colors of the trees. And rolling down the car window, I felt the breeze of autumn lift my hair. I sniffed mountain laurel. In that moment of simple quiescence, I tasted the beauty of life. I felt God’s contemplative peace enter my heart.”

You know, it’s easy for us to operate under the illusion that what we are doing ... even our worrying ... is so important that we cannot stop doing it for a minute. We think that we cannot slow down, especially for something so trifling as a turtle ... or the birds of the air ... or the lilies of the field. But that is exactly the sort of thing we must never be too busy for. Stopping and observing, seeing and hearing ... these constitute for us a spiritual art. For they are the avenues along which we drink in life and taste its goodness.

So may we hear the word of God for us today: that the Lord is near, and that we need not worry about anything. For such counsel can save our lives. Amen.