

May 3, 2020
The Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year A
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Psalm 23
Acts 2:42-47
John 10:1-10

[Note: This sermon was preached during a Zoom worship service, and incorporates images and clips that were shared with participants. Follow the provided links to see them.]

I want to start with a song.¹

[Play part of "Don't Worry, Be Happy" (00:57-1:25 in the linked version).]

"Don't Worry, Be Happy," written and recorded by Bobby McFerrin, was released in the year 1988. At the time, I was working for my first employer out of undergraduate school, a chemical plant in rural south Alabama. About two years in, I had been promoted to production engineer in one of the chemical manufacturing units. My boss, the unit manager, was a man named Dick, and he was a real... jerk. He was just plain mean, a constant fountain of verbal abuse. I give him credit for one thing: I was only the second-ever woman production engineer in that very large chemical plant, but he treated me exactly like he treated the men. Unfortunately, that treatment was awful.

Dick's behavior was especially aggravating because he was such a *cheerful* jerk. The more cleverly insulting he was, the more obnoxiously merry he appeared. "Don't Worry, Be Happy" came out while I worked for him, and it became his theme song. As a result, I hated it. Dick would shout insults and orders, and then sing himself on to the next thing [*sing part*]. Those words only made me more worried and less happy. At the end of the day, we all made our separate ways on the long walk from the unit to the parking lot. He always seemed to set off prancing, but I usually trudged along, staring glumly down at the tips of my steel-toed shoes.

No boss should behave that way. At the same time, Dick's behavior was painful for me not just because of who *he* was, but also because of who *I* was. I was too inexperienced to realize that it was just a fun game for him, and I was much inclined to be a worrier. A few years later, having changed jobs and cities, I read an article positing that every human being possesses an inner "worry box." It theorized that each person has a worry box of a set size, and that their box is always full, whether it's full of important things or mundane things. In other words, a person has a worry set point that they will hit one way or another.

I heard a lot of truth in that, because it matched my own experience. My mother was a self-professed worrier who proudly claimed her identity as a worrier right up until the end. She had a giant worry box that was always chock-full, often with things that seemed to me unnecessary.

I still think there’s something to the idea that each of us possesses an inner worry box. But I also think we have the ability to reduce the box’s size. Maybe we actually have two inner boxes, a worry box and a happy box. Maybe the happy box also stays full, whether it’s full of important things or mundane things. And maybe reducing the size of the worry box increases the space available for the happy box.

[Display the following image.]



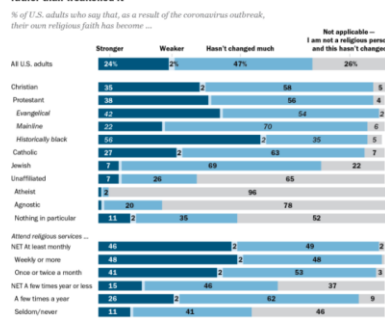
Last week I Googled “worry box” to see if that original long-ago article would turn up. It didn’t. But I did find a handful of articles suggesting the use of an actual physical “worry box” as a method for reducing stress. As a worry crops up, you write it down on a slip of paper and drop it in. The idea is that it helps you move on. It’s especially recommended for use with children.² I think this is a great idea, and I think that we Christians have some additional tools.

Over the thirty years since Dick was my boss, I have come a long way. Back then, I avoided religion, because I knew of only one Christian conception of God, and that God behaved rather like Dick, doling out abuse and going merrily on his way. People would say that God loves me, while attributing behavior to God that perverted the meaning of the word *love*.

We hear that kind of talk now, from those who suggest that the coronavirus pandemic is God’s punishment for ... something ... and we better fix it, or else. Actions do have consequences, but it’s wrong to suggest that awful recent events are Godly saber-rattling. God not only *says* “love” but also *is* love. Cultivating a deep appreciation for the God of love has the power to positively shift one’s worry–happy ratio. If ever there was a time to do so, it’s now.

[Display the following image.]

Americans far more likely to say coronavirus crisis has strengthened their faith, rather than weakened it



Last week Pew Research Center released the results of a new survey with this summary statement: “Americans far more likely to say coronavirus crisis has strengthened their faith, rather than weakened it.”³ Here are the figures.

24% of Americans say their faith is stronger, and only 2% that it is weaker, because of coronavirus. I hope that each of us is among the 24%. If so, it’s not about putting our heads in the sand. There is plenty to worry about, and some people have more than their share of worry-worthy conditions. To be clear, I am not one to blurt out to another, “Don’t worry, be happy!” Still, I know that having less worry and more happy is good for us, and therefore also good for the world that Jesus would have us serve. And I think we get there by cultivating our relationships with the God who lovingly accompanies us through *all* times.

Our tradition offers lots of helps for our approach to the God of loving accompaniment. This Sunday, the fourth Sunday of Easter, is always Good Shepherd Sunday. Each year, we hear a portion of chapter 10 of the Gospel of John. Each year, I am reminded that the very earliest surviving images of Jesus are of Jesus as Good Shepherd. Here are a couple of those images, both from the third century, both found in the catacombs of Rome.

[Display the following image.]

This one is from the Catacomb of Domitilla:⁴



[Display the following image.]

This one is from the Catacomb of Callistus:⁵



Remember, the Roman catacombs are tombs. The image of God as Jesus the Good Shepherd must have been comforting to those Christians of so very long ago. I wonder ... What gives you comfort? What helps you set aside the worries of the day?

This wondering reminded me of a lovely prayer from the prayer book of the Anglican Church in New Zealand. It's a night prayer, but these days it seems to fit all day. It goes like this:

Lord, it is night.

The night is for stillness.

Let us be still in the presence of God.

It is night after a long day.

What has been done has been done;
what has not been done has not been done;
let it be.

The night is dark.

Let our fears of the darkness of the world and of our own lives
rest in you.

The night is quiet.

Let the quietness of your peace enfold us,
all dear to us,
and all who have no peace.

The night heralds the dawn.

Let us look expectantly to a new day,
new joys,
new possibilities.

In your name we pray.

Amen.⁶

When it comes to comfort, there is perhaps nothing equivalent to the 23rd psalm. You heard one sung setting of it earlier. I'm going to close with another piece by composer-performer Bobby McFerrin. This is his version of the 23rd psalm, which he dedicated to his mother.⁷

[Play McFerrin's "23rd Psalm."]

Notes

¹ You can hear Bobby McFerrin's "Don't Worry, Be Happy" on his official YouTube channel, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFDOSq6Wxa0> (accessed May 3, 2020).

² One such article was by Annmarie Dadoly, "Two Techniques for Reducing Stress," Harvard Health Blog, April 9, 2011, available at <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/two-techniques-for-reducing-stress-201104092235> (accessed May 3, 2020).

³ Claire Gecewicz, "Few Americans Say Their House of Worship is Open, but a Quarter Say Their Faith has Grown Amid Pandemic," Pew Research Center, April 30, 2020, available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/30/few-americans-say-their-house-of-worship-is-open-but-a-quarter-say-their-religious-faith-has-grown-amid-pandemic/> (accessed May 3, 2020).

⁴ The image is from the Jean and Alexander Heard Divinity Library at Vanderbilt University, available at <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/diglib-fulldisplay.pl?SID=20200502534620164&code=act&RC=49961&Row=12> (accessed May 3, 2020).

⁵ The image is from the Jean and Alexander Heard Divinity Library at Vanderbilt University, available at <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=49960> (accessed May 3, 2020).

⁶ *A New Zealand Prayer Book* (The Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand, and Polynesia, 1988), 184. The entire book is available online at www.anglicanprayerbook.nz (accessed May 3, 2020).

⁷ You can hear Bobby McFerrin's "23rd Psalm" on his official YouTube channel, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJixdpZ5m1o> (accessed May 3, 2020).