

“Freedom”

Isaiah 49:8-16a, Matthew 6:24-34 & Luke 38:40-42

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In the fifteenth century, in a tiny village near Nuremberg, lived a family with eighteen children. In order to keep food on the table for twenty, the father, a goldsmith by profession, worked almost eighteen hours a day at his trade and any other paying chore he could find. Despite their seemingly hopeless condition, Albrecht and Albert, had a dream. They both wanted to pursue their talent for art, but they knew full well that their father would never be financially able to send either of them to Nuremberg to study at the academy. After many long discussions, the two boys finally worked out a pact. They would toss a coin. The loser would go down into the nearby mines and with his earnings, support his brother while he attended the academy. Then, when that brother who won the toss completed his studies, in four years, he would support the other brother at the academy either with sales of his artwork or, if necessary, also by laboring in the mines. They tossed a coin on a Sunday morning after church.

Albrecht Dürer won the toss and went off to Nuremberg. Albert went down into the dangerous mines, and for the next four years financed his brother. By graduation, Albrecht's etchings, woodcuts, and oils started to generate income for the family. When the young artist returned to his village, they held a festive dinner to celebrate. At the meal, Albrecht rose to drink a toast to his beloved brother for the years of sacrifice that had enabled him to follow his passion. His closing words were, “And now, Albert, blessed brother of mine, now it is your turn. Now you can go to Nuremberg to pursue your dream, and I will take care of you.” Albert sat, tears streaming down his pale face, shaking his lowered head from side to side while he sobbed and repeated over and over, “No . . . no . . . no . . .no.” Finally, Albert rose, wiped the tears from his cheeks and said, “No, brother. I cannot go. It is too late for me. Look what four years in the mines have done to my hands! The bones in every finger have been smashed at least once, and lately I have been suffering from arthritis so badly in my right hand that I cannot even hold a glass to return your toast, much less make delicate lines on parchment or canvas with a pen or a brush. No, brother . . . for me it is too late.”

More than 450 years have passed. Albrecht's hundreds of masterful portraits, silver-point sketches, watercolors, charcoals, woodcuts, and copper engravings hang in great museums around the world. His most famous work was made to honor his brother. With grateful love he drew his brother's sacrificial hands with palms together and thin fingers stretched skyward. He called his powerful drawing simply “Hands”, but the public renamed his tribute of love, “The Praying Hands”.

All of us enjoy freedom, because others have sacrificed for us. Some of them gave up their life, so we can be free. Most of us have friends and family, moms or dads that have sacrificed, so our lives can be more abundant. Jesus gave the ultimate sacrifice to set us all free from sin and death to love and have eternal life. Is your love bringing honor to those who have sacrificed for you?

We have not been set free to fall back into bondage, to become a slave of worry. We honor those who have sacrificed for us by loving extravagantly, by seeking first God's kingdom and righteousness.

Jesus knows all of us completely. Jesus knows our tendency to become a slave to our routine, to become a slave of worry, to become a slave in our quest for possessions. We have a tendency to be selfish. When one focuses on self, what they have, what they want, how others view them, comparing self to others, worry grows.

When God set the Israelites free from slavery to the Egyptians, God only asked that they love God and love one another. However, the Israelites were worried about how they would cross the Red Sea, despite all the mighty miracles God had shown them. They were worried about their next meal, despite the daily manna and quail. They were worried that they couldn't physically see God, like a golden calf, despite all the love and blessings God had showered on them. Their worry made them pessimistic, grumpy, cynical complainers. Their worry blinded their sense of direction causing a journey of a few weeks to become 40 years of aimless wandering. Their worry distorted their thinking to the point that they desired to return to Egypt as slaves instead of living into the fullness of the Promise Land.

We are still prone to worry today. Some people worry as they stay with the familiarity and financial stability of a life draining job that is not a good fit for their skills to provide for their family. Others worry as they leave a job to find a life giving job. Graduates worry as they are caught between living with their parents and establishing their own career and home. Sometimes it is best to make the best of the current situation, other times to boldly find a new job, home or school, still other times to live someplace in between, in the tension. No matter what choices we make Jesus tells us to not worry. Jesus' sacrifice for us ensures that God's grace will perfect us, unite us in harmony with all people, and resurrect us to eternal life. Ultimately our future is glorious for eternity.

Jesus identifies money as a primary source of worry. Jesus said **Matthew 6:24** **"You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money."** Most of us struggle trying to worship God and money. How many of your worries have something to do with money? Jesus invites us to live into our freedom by worshiping God more than money. Being grateful for those who have sacrificed for us. Being grateful for the beauty of creation. Being grateful for blessings, the love of family, the joy of friendship. Enjoying what we have instead of worrying over what we do not have.

Worry is futile. Worry accomplishes nothing. Worry does not add a single moment or a single blessing to life. However, if one turns thoughts of worry into thoughts of love, they will have a profound, eternal impact on the world. In most cases worry takes time off life, worry hinders relationships, worry tarnishes beauty, worry enslaves. Jesus commands us to live in the present and not worry about the future. Corrie Ten Boom wrote, "Worry is a cycle of inefficient thoughts whirling around a center of fear."

Planning for tomorrow is time well spent. Worrying about tomorrow is time wasted. Planning involves thinking about our call and trusting God's guidance. Worries are fueled by fear, shattering our trust in God. Worry damages our health, disrupts productivity, negatively affects the way we treat others, and erodes our love of God. Never let a worry about tomorrow affect your love for God today.

Jesus says, "Do not worry". Jesus didn't say, "God will make sure nothing bad ever happens to you." Bad things happen to all of us. When they do, that is the time to deal with the situation. Jesus invites us to seek first God's Kingdom, that is love, joy, hope, peace, gratitude, grace. When we seek first God's Kingdom, worry subsides. Detached from God, trying to be self-sufficient, everything worries us. We are finite and mortal. The closer we are to God's heart, the more we are certain that God will perfect and heal us for eternity. As we perceive more and more of God's infinite love, the more certain we are that nothing we can do, or fail to do, can ever separate us from God's love. God's love assures us that we can never be diminished, broken, or hurt in any way beyond the restoration power of God.

Jesus wants the best for us. God knows we need food, clothing, shelter, etc. Jesus wants us to enjoy clothing, the variety of foods God has created and possessions. However, one can easily drift to worship of creation rather than the Creator. Whenever we worship creation, success, money, health and possessions worry increases. True joy is found in God not in stuff or accomplishments. Love flows from God not from possessions. Eternal life comes only from God, not from health care, diet, or exercise. We are bombarded with advertisements that tell us that all our worries can be fixed by a particular product, service, or pill. Only God can fill the void in our life, truly satisfy us and set us free to enjoy abundant life. Life unravels when we seek first anything other than God.

Jesus visited the home of Mary and Martha. Mary was deepening her relationship with Jesus. Martha was worried, scurrying around the house doing household chores and cooking dinner. Finally, she blew. **Luke 38:40-42** **"Lord, doesn't it seem unfair to you that my sister just sits here while I do all the work? Tell her to come and help me."** But the Lord said to her **"Martha, Martha you are worried and distracted by many things. You only need one thing, Mary has chosen it and it will not be taken from her."** Mary chose to worship God. Jesus needed Martha to cook, clean, teach, and do the logistics of ministry. Jesus commands us to serve with love. Mary probably did plenty of work. The difference is whether you work with worry or are worry-free. The difference is knowing when to stop, so one can spend time with those you love. Some fixate on a project and worry about its completion, making them oblivious to those around them and diminishing their love for others. Some misplace their sense of worth. Seeking worth from work, clubs, or accomplishments rather than knowing ones worth comes from being God's beloved. If your worth comes from anything other than God, you will be filled with worry. If your fun comes from only being first and not the sport or quest itself, you will be filled with worry. If your happiness comes from stuff, you will be filled with worry.

Jesus is radically calling us to choose a life of trust in God over a life of worry. When we strive for things that do not fade, cannot be stolen, or used up, and never wear out or depreciate we will be at peace. When our thoughts are dominated by love, then we will discover the fullness of life for love never ends.

Kenneth Pfifer wrote, "O Lord, the very things I handle and see lose meaning when they become ends in themselves. They are all given meaning by your Spirit, by love, hope, and faith. I know when I come down to it, if I have all kinds of earthly goods and have not love, I have nothing. I need the mystery beyond the tangible. I need Your Spirit to give meaning to the material things I prize. I cannot divide life up; you have made it whole. If I avoid love, diminish hope, deny faith, my appreciation of my house and land, my meat and potatoes, shrinks, and I become a little man with little aims and little power. So help me to see that I worship in Spirit and in truth, so life assumes wholeness. I worship in truth insofar as I know that no life can be separated from your Spirit. I worship as I offer it all unto you."

The practice of holding palms together in prayer comes from the medieval practice of a vassal placing his hands between the hands of their master in supplication. It is a symbol of worship asking God to guide the work of one's hands

Tomorrow is Memorial Day. I hope you will be able to pause from worry to seek first God's Kingdom. Worship God by enjoying the beauty of creation. Share love by helping whoever is doing the cooking so everyone can enjoy the meal together. If you buy something, donate something as well. Ponder all you have instead of dreaming of your wants. Write a thank you card to someone who gave of themselves to make your life better. Praise God for Jesus' sacrifice that sets all of us free to enjoy abundant life. Thank a veteran for sacrificing for our freedom. Tell the family of someone who died serving our country how you are using your freedom to love extravagantly. Amen