

## Navigating Worry in the Age of Coronavirus

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March 14, 2020  
Luke 12:13-34

I want to welcome you to Vineyard Columbus. Welcome East Campus, welcome Lane Avenue, welcome Sawmill, welcome La Vina. I've never said this before—welcome Cooper Road campus. I am going to be talking about a heavy topic today, but before we do that, I do want to begin with some good news.

A year ago, we did a campaign called The Story Continues. In that campaign we invited you to invest in the next chapter of Vineyard Columbus' story. The church pledged \$13 million to do new mission, develop new leaders, to start new campus communities, and to build new buildings for those communities. One of the campus communities that we have been praying about launching over the last several months is an Online Campus. We were thinking about launching it six months from now. But the Coronavirus has pushed up our timeline.

So, as our Vineyard Columbus community is gathered around our city, and around the world, I want to welcome you to our first Online Campus! It is through your generosity in our campaign that we are able to launch today. It is our hope that many people find a front door to the church through our online campus. I am praying to be able to gather together in person soon. But for now, I am grateful that we can still worship together as one church wherever you are gathering with us today.

What an extraordinary week we have just been through. Things are moving so quickly that no one can keep up with the news. This past Monday, the Italian Prime Minister declared a lock down on virtually all of Italy. We said, "OK. Well, that's Italy." Then the Stock Market began to tank. It's down about 30% this week. Trillions of dollars of our savings have evaporated in a week.

On Wednesday, the World Health Organization declared coronavirus to be a global pandemic. Colleges decided to suspend in-person classes and they're telling students to not come back from spring break.

Later on Wednesday, the NBA suspended its season. And the President announced the suspension of flights from Europe.

On Thursday, Major League Baseball announced that it's suspending the start of the baseball season. And the NCAA cancelled March Madness!

On Friday, our President declared a national emergency and the stock market surged.

Governor DeWine announced that all gatherings over 100 in the city are cancelled. I just want to give a shout out to Gov. DeWine. Epidemiologists are saying that the earlier we intervene regarding this virus and the more aggressively we intervene will determine how many people get sick from coronavirus and how many deaths we are going to experience. I appreciate so much the Governor's actions and that we have a Governor who is sensitive to faith communities. He did have an exemption for church services. I'm grateful for that. But the leadership here at Vineyard Columbus decided not to take advantage of those exceptions for church services. The Bible tells us that the second great commandment is to love our neighbors as ourselves. Part of the love of our neighbor is to love the most vulnerable in our midst.

We were concerned as a leadership team for those in our midst who are elderly, those who are immuno-compromised. We don't want anyone to say, "The pastor said it was ok to come to church." God forbid that anyone get exposed because we were not exercising an abundance of caution for our large gatherings.

As I mentioned in the email that I sent to the congregation just a couple of days ago, health crises are nothing new for the church.

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Health crises are not new for the church

Back in the early church in 165 AD, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, a devastating epidemic swept throughout the Roman Empire. It's estimated that between a quarter and a third of the Roman Empire's citizens died from this epidemic. Historians believe that this may have been the first introduction of smallpox to the western world. Whatever it was, it was deadly and it killed the emperor himself.

Then less than 100 years later, in 251, a new and equally devastating epidemic swept through the empire. The interesting thing is that paganism – all of the old pagan religions in Rome – collapsed under the weight of these epidemics. But Christianity flourished. Scholars like Rodney Stark in his book *The Rise of Christianity*, give a number of possible reasons why Christianity flourished during the epidemic.

Certainly Christianity offers a much better and hopeful worldview during times of crisis than any of the other alternatives available to people then or now. Christianity gives us tremendous insight regarding the meaning of suffering and how we can handle pain. But Stark also suggests that one of the reasons why the church kept growing even in the midst of the epidemic was simply because the church practiced love of neighbor. While everybody else ran away from plague and left sick relatives and sick neighbors to fend for themselves, Christians cared for the sick. On occasion, Christians themselves would get sick. But simple care for one another – food and water and washing – resulted in many sick people recovering from their illness and many turned to Christ.

The church has faced health crises before and epidemics are not new in Christian history. And

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Concern for people's physical health is also not a new thing for Christians

We have the example of Jesus who went everywhere healing the sick. Jesus wasn't just concerned about saving people's souls for heaven. He cared about people's bodies here on planet Earth.

Something that you may not know is that the whole concept of hospitals was started by the Christian church. In the ancient world, there were places where soldiers, military people went to get patched up after a battle. What you may not know is that modern hospitals can trace their founding way back to the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. Those of you who know something about church history and Christian doctrine may know that the Council of Nicea is credited with firmly establishing in the doctrine that the Son of God is not a creature, but he shares one substance with God the Father. In other words, the Council of Nicea is credited with underlining what the Scripture teaches, that Jesus is fully God and fully man, one Lord our Messiah.

There's something else. It also said that in every city where there was a cathedral, the church ought to establish a hospital. Not just to care for military people who are wounded in battle, but a place where sick people could go and be nursed back to health. That's why anywhere you go, you'll see hospitals that have roots in the Christian church. Here in town, you know, we have Riverside Methodist Hospital and St. Ann's and Mt. Carmel. Health care and concern for the sick is nothing new for the church. This is part of our history.

But after a week like we just went through, the most natural thing in the world is for us to worry. People are worried about whether they're going to get sick or whether loved ones will get sick. For those of us nearing the age of retirement, we're worried about our savings. People are worried about whether they're going to have a job, whether they're going to be able to find a job.

Part of the problem is that we don't know what we're facing. We don't know if coronavirus is going to infect half of America as some of the worst case scenarios suggest. We don't know if our hospital system is going to be able to handle the load. Part of the craziness that we're seeing where people are fighting with each other over toilet paper at Costco and screaming at store clerks because shelves are emptied, is that we Americans are already starting with very high levels of anxiety.

This past year, the Gallup organization produced a report called "The World Emotions Report". Guess which nation leads the world in worry and anxiety, according to the Gallup organization? They surveyed 140 countries. Guess which nation is the gold

medal winner in “the worry competition”? You guessed it. America! We’re number one!

America does not only lead the world in good things, but sometimes we lead the world in bad things like anxiety and worry. So, we’re already starting at an incredibly high baseline of worry. And then something like the coronavirus hits and it amps us worried Americans to insane levels of stress.

Today, I’m not going to continue in our series on Navigating Doubt. Instead, I’ve decided to speak to this particular moment in our national and global story. I’ve called today’s message, “Navigating Worry in the Age of Coronavirus”. Let’s pray.

Let me read to you from Luke 12. Here’s what we read:

Slide Luke 12:1a

Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples,

Let me set the scene for you. Jesus is preaching out in the open air to a large crowd of people. There are so many people there that they are literally stepping on each other. This is likely taking place on a hillside by the Sea of Galilee. There are small farms all around. Fishermen are out on the sea fishing.

Jesus is mainly talking to poor people, people who are subsistence farmers. They are living on the edge of existence, scratching out a living. He’s talking to people – we would call them the working poor – folks who are fishermen, they’re laborers. While he’s talking, he’s interrupted by a man who is likely pretty well off. Here’s what we read:

Slide Luke 12:13-15

<sup>13</sup>Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

<sup>14</sup>Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?”

<sup>15</sup>Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

Then beginning in verse 22, Jesus turns his attention away from the wealthy guy who is worried about an inheritance and he turns towards these subsistence farmers, these poor fishermen, these laborers who are just scratching out a living. Here’s what we read.

Slide Luke 12:22-23

<sup>22</sup> Then Jesus said to his disciples: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. <sup>23</sup> For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes.

I think what we can draw from Jesus’ words is that both the wealthy and the poor are mistaken regarding the source of our worry.

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We believe that the source of our worry is outside of us

If you ask almost anyone, “Why are you so worried?” People will answer saying, “Well, the reason I’m worried is because my savings for retirement just nosedived.” “The reason that I’m worried is because I may be laid off.” “I already have bad health and I don’t know what the coronavirus is going to do to me or to a loved one.” This is on top of all the other worries that we have. A family member may have a drug problem or one of your closest friends may be going through a divorce or is in the hospital. I am worried, I usually believe, because of all the problems outside of me that are just piling up until I feel crushed. I feel like I have a thousand pounds sitting on my chest.

But Jesus says to you and me, “You’ve completely misunderstood the source of your worry. It’s not because all this stuff is happening all around you. It’s not because of the news that you’re getting all week long. The reason that you worry is because of something inside of you.”

Jesus says to the wealthy man,

Slide Luke 12:15

<sup>15</sup> Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

This problem that you have with your parents’ estate is not simply due to the injustice that you’re experiencing from your brother. Rather, you’re upset because of something inside of you which if you don’t cut it off, is going to kill you. He says to the man, “You think that you’re going to secure your life if you just had a little more. Then you think you’d feel ok. If only you just had a little more. But you are deceiving yourself because enough will never be enough for you. You have an insatiable appetite for more!”

We saw this on display in the most vivid terms this week in America. How many rolls of toilet paper are enough? How many bottles of Purell or hand sanitizer is enough? People are getting in fistfights in Costco and Sam’s Club over toilet paper. How many bars of hand soap do you need? How many bottles of water? How many Clorox wipes or face masks? When is enough enough?

Jesus then turns to the people who are farmers and fishermen, the people who are living on the edge of existence. He says, "Do you know what your problem is? You worry too much." Three times in the text, Jesus tells these poor folks, these folks who are dirt farmers, "don't worry!"

Slide Luke 12:22

<sup>22</sup> Then Jesus said to his disciples: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear.

Slide Luke 12:29

<sup>29</sup> And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it.

Slide Luke 12:32

<sup>32</sup> "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.

Do not worry. Do not worry. Do not be afraid. Jesus says that the problem with worry is not coming from the coronavirus. It's not coming from Wall Street. It's not coming from the politicians or the medical professionals or anything outside of you. The worry is coming from inside of you.

I can hear what some of you are saying. "Really? Thanks a lot!" That was my initial feeling as I read this text. Thanks, Jesus. Because not only am I facing major threats to my retirement account and to my health and to the health of my loved ones, but now you pile on and you're blaming me for worrying. Talk about blaming the victim! All this terrible stuff is happening, and you say, "Oh and by the way, if you're worrying that's your fault." But as I thought more deeply about Jesus' words, I thought, "You know what? What Jesus is saying is actually really hopeful!"

It's really encouraging because here's the deal. You and I can't control anything that's happening outside of us. I've got no power over Wall Street and neither do you. I've got no power over the politicians and what they're doing and saying, and neither do you. The only thing we really have control of is ourselves. What's going on inside of my heart and what's going on inside of your heart. And Jesus is giving you and me a really hopeful word in saying, "You do not have to react the way everybody else is. You can choose to not worry." You do not have to worry or be controlled by everything going on around you! Whether you're well off or whether you're poor. Jesus says that you're mistaken about the source of your worries.

Jesus says you're also mistaken about the cure for your worries.

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We believe that the cure of worry is psychology and probabilities

Jesus doesn't say to you and me, "Just think positively. You just need to have an optimistic view of life and see the glass is half full rather than half empty. Turn that frown upside down. When life hands you a lemon, you squeeze it and make it into lemonade. Don't worry, be happy. Think positive thoughts." Jesus never says, "You know, the way you're going to deal with your worries is through some psychological trick."

And neither does he say the way you're going to win over your worry is probabilities. You know, what you're worried about is probably not going to happen. Likely, Wall Street will recover. The economy is fundamentally sound. You probably are not going to die. What are the chances? Probability doesn't help people who are gripped by worry. If you are a worrier, you likely say, "It could happen." What are the chances that a plane will crash? Well, if I'm on the one that crashes, I'm going to die.

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What is the Christian response to worry?

Jesus says to us, "You need to answer three "who" questions correctly." When I read Jesus' words – do not worry. Do not worry. Do not worry – my initial reaction is to be kind of irritated. I don't know about you, but if I'm really anxious I don't appreciate someone saying to me, "There, there. Don't worry." That doesn't make me feel better. It actually really annoys me. I don't know how you respond to someone saying, "Don't worry." But I'll bet that many of you are like me and don't like it.

But remember, first of all, who is telling us not to worry.

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Who is telling us not to worry

We need to remember that the person telling us not to worry was Jesus who lived anything but an easy, carefree life. We're getting this counsel of "do not worry" not from some fat cat who is living in a gated community and has billions of dollars in investments and is saying "don't worry about everything". We're hearing this from Jesus who said about himself, "foxes have holes and the birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." We're talking about Jesus who didn't own his own home. We're talking about a person who lived at a subsistence level most of his life. We're talking about Jesus who already saw the shadows of the cross growing and who knew where his life was headed.

He knew when he said, "Do not worry" that he was personally facing death. When I think about who is saying "Do not worry" to us, I think about the Apostle Paul who in the book of Philippians said this:

Slide Philippians 4:6-7

<sup>6</sup> Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Again, these words were not uttered by a person who was comfortably sitting on a yacht somewhere in the Caribbean or issuing a public relations statement from their country club. Paul is saying, “do not be anxious” from a prison cell. The book of Philippians speaks to us about the incredibly stressful circumstances that Paul was facing. There were relational conflicts in the church. People basically made it their aim to make Paul’s life miserable. On top of being in prison, on top of relational conflicts, he tells us that he’s looking at the prospect of dying in the near future in Philippians 2. He tells us that he’s about to be poured out like a drink offering. He’s probably talking about the fact that he believes that he may be quickly giving up his life in martyrdom for the Christian faith.

The bottom line is this, friends. We can hear really hard counsel from someone who understands what we’re going through. Somebody who is facing cancer for the first time can hear “you don’t need to worry” from someone who has faced an identical form of cancer in the past.

A widower can hear challenging things from someone who has lost their spouse much easier than from someone who hasn’t. We can hear things about having a prodigal child or a kid who is addicted much easier from someone else who has had a difficult child than from someone who hasn’t. When I hear the words “do not worry” or “do not be anxious” I remind myself who is saying these things - Jesus and the Apostle Paul – who knew what it is like to face really hard things.

The first “who” question we can answer is who is speaking to us. And secondly,

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Who is in control

Jesus says this in Luke 12

Slide Luke 12:25-26

<sup>25</sup> Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? <sup>26</sup> Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?

Jesus is getting at a really important issue here that is at the heart of worry. It is the attempt by you and me to control the uncontrollable. Central to the problem of worry is the illusion that we’re in control when we’re not. For example – if I could just do retirement right my future will be secure. If I can distance myself from enough people, I won’t catch this virus. If I just stock up on enough toilet paper and hand sanitizer and dog food and staples, we can ride this thing out. If I can figure out the right child-raising

technique or say the right things to my kids or get them in the right school or use the right form of discipline, that will guarantee that my kids will turn out all right.

We worriers always have control issues. That's the bottom line. And Jesus is saying to us, "You can't control much of anything. You can't add a single hour to your life or a few inches to your height." By the way – if I could have added a few inches to my height – I would have done it years ago.

Jesus says, instead consider the lilies of the field.

Slide Luke 12:27

<sup>27</sup> "Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.

I read a wonderful meditation the other day from a Catholic spiritual director named Tetlow. It was really helpful. Jesus calls on his disciples to consider the lilies of the field. He's telling us to think about how little control the lily has over its life. The lily doesn't choose which field it will grow in. And you didn't choose where you were born, when you were born, what family you grew up in, who your parents were or anything else about the circumstances of your birth. How much of your life really is under your control?

The lily has no control over what grows around it. It might have to fight for its life because there are all these weeds and thorns. Or it might have a huge sunflower growing right next to it. And we have no control over what is growing up around us. We may have had to fight for our lives in our families. Or you may have grown up with a brother or a sister who shown more brightly than you or in a family where you were not the favorite. We can't control what's growing around us.

The lily has no control over the weather. Whether its rain or drought. We have no control over what nations are doing or what the government is doing now. We can't control what our neighbors are doing. We have no control over the stock market or the coronavirus. How much control do we really have over our world?

The lily has no control over its color or shape. We can't control the color of our skin or the shape of our bodies. How much control do you really have? Jesus says to consider the lilies. Really consider and think deeply about the lilies of the field.

The truth is that only God is in control of everything. Do you really believe that? If you believe in God's control and you believe God is good and will work everything together for your good, then you should never be anxious. Think about it. If God is in control of everything and if God really will work everything together for your good, then what do you have to worry about now? God rules over Satan. God rules over viruses. God rules over banks and corporations. God rules over governments. God rules your boss. He

rules over people, including your ex-wife and ex-husband. He rules over colleges you're applying to and jobs that you're applying for. God rules over your body and the chemistry that's at work in your body, God rules over every cell of your body. And God rules over your loved ones.

And if God rules over everything and he's working everything together for your good, then what do you have to worry about? Will you experience future pain? Yes. Will there be difficulty in your life? Yes. If worse comes to worse, will God, your Father, still be in control? Yes. Does he know about all these things that are coming in this world? Yes. Will he work it for our good? Yes.

There are three "who" questions Christians need to answer to respond differently to the coronavirus outbreak than everyone else in the world.

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Who is telling us not to worry. It's Jesus.

Who is in control. God.

And finally,

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Who you are

Slide Luke 12:27

<sup>27</sup> "Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.

Jesus is not talking about hybrid roses that are carefully tended to. He's talking about wildflowers growing by the side of the road. He's saying that God takes care of flowers that don't get any human tending, that don't get watered by anyone, that nobody else takes care of. God makes these wildflowers beautiful. Jesus is saying if God makes wildflowers that nobody is worrying about, that are growing in the gravel, if God makes wildflowers beautiful, so beautiful that they outshine even Solomon the King in all of his splendor, how much more will you outshine the lilies? What Jesus is saying is that God your Father will take care of you. God will clothe you in his glory. This is a promise from Jesus Christ himself. Jesus is saying, "I promise you I will dress you in glory."

You don't need to worry about your health. If worse comes to worse and you or I die, Jesus says "I will raise you from the dead and clothe you with heavenly glory. Jesus says, "You don't need to worry about the few dollars that you've got invested in the stock market. I'll give you an eternal inheritance." You don't need to worry if there's enough hand sanitizer in the grocery store. The blood of Jesus Christ will cleanse you better than any hand sanitizer ever will.

Who is speaking to us and telling us not to worry? It's Jesus. Who is in control of all of these uncontrollable events? It's God. Who are we to God? We are the beloved of our Father. God promises he will clothe us in glory. Therefore, do not worry!

Gospel call.

At this time, you will see a button on the right side of your screen that says "raise your hand". If you would like to receive Christ for the first time, would you click that button and let us know? One of our pastors who is live hosting the service will make every effort to connect with you.