

“SOS: The Scarlett O’Hara Syndrome”

Listen to the following lines and see if you can remember what movie they came from. “My Mama always said, ‘Life was like a box of chocolates; you never know what you're gonna get.’” “Nobody puts Baby in a corner.” “Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.” “Here's looking at you, kid.” And of course, the ever famous, “I can't think about that right now. If I do, I'll go crazy. I'll think about that tomorrow.” Well, between Forrest Gump, Johnny Castle, Dorothy and The Terminator Johnny Castle, only Scarlett said something Biblical – dare I even say, theologically correct!

Now, to be completely honest, I don't think I would hold Scarlett O’Hara up as a picture of moral virtue and certainly wouldn't call “Gone With the Wind” a spiritual movie, but on this one account, she seems to be right in line with the thinking of Jesus Christ. Because Scarlett is saying, “I cannot be concerned about tomorrow's worries – I have enough to deal with today.” And that is exactly what Jesus tells us.

Scarlett's words came to me as I was agonizing over all that I had to get done between Monday at 3:00 and Wednesday's Bible Study at 5:30. I was in full-blown panic mode! Then I remembered the promise I made to myself LAST time I had what seemed like too much on my plate. Because of course, at the end of the tunnel, there was the light waiting on me. Everything was accomplished – on time – in decent and good order. I remembered again that God did not call me to be a pastor by myself – God is doing it with me. And I promised I would not get all worked up about it – I would take it one day at a time. Sort of a more modern version of Scarlett's declaration. And a little like Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount. But I seem to forget so easily.

Now let me be clear. Jesus is not preaching a life of passivity where everyone sits in a chair and says, "The Lord will provide!" He is also not telling us that if we follow God, we will live lives of abundance and prosperity. Jesus is telling us that we must keep our priorities straight. And on this account, I think Scarlett has it right. Perhaps we all need a good dose of what I have named SOS: The Scarlett O'Hara Syndrome. And when we have the good fortune to suffer from this syndrome, we seek God's kingdom over the earthly kingdom and God's righteousness replaces our worries. Let me explain why this is so beneficial.

When we make God's kingdom a priority over worry, then we experience the people of God. And in God's kingdom, people think about their neighbors even as they look after themselves. I can share a beautiful case in point that happened with a friend of mine a few months ago. This friend, who lives in another town, has several rental properties, one that is close enough for her to see from her bedroom window. One night she was awakened by her dogs and discovered that the house behind them, the one that she and her husband own, was in flames. After calling 9-1-1, she raced outside to find that the renter standing outside watching everything she owned literally go up in flames. The house was a total loss and the woman, who I will call Mary, had only the clothes on her back.

During the Sunday School hour that Sunday, my friend asked for prayers for Mary. She never mentioned her own loss or even shared that she herself was the owner of the house. As soon as worship was over, the Clerk of her Session approached her and asked her Mary's last name. Then he filled in a check and handed it to her. It seems that news of Mary's tragedy had spread. The Session of this small, rural church had called a meeting between Sunday School and Church and voted to give Mary \$1000 to help her get back on her feet.

Within a week, Mary's own church had offered her a house that they own for her to live in. People who heard about her misfortune but had never met her were bringing clothes and household goods. Mary was soon overwhelmed by the way those in the kingdom of God loved her through that time.

Now I am not saying that one must be a Christian to have generous, giving hearts. There are certainly great philanthropists of other faiths and even no faith at all. We all know people who do not claim to know God but would give you the proverbial shirt off their back if you needed it. But I believe that when Jesus tells us that instead of worrying we should seek God's kingdom, he is reminding us that the kingdom of God is FULL of people who make *people* their priority.

Life is full of setbacks, disappointments, failures and frustrations. But life is also full of joys, triumphs, accomplishments and victories. When we seek God's Kingdom, we move from worry to reliance on God's people. These are people who seek to see God's standards as universally accepted, and invest their time, energy and resources in the pursuit of God's righteousness.

Jesus is also telling us that when we make God's kingdom a priority, we don't have to worry about yesterday or tomorrow. We can live one day at a time because in God's perspective, today is all that matters. I believe that is what the Psalmist is telling us when he says, "If you O LORD, should mark iniquities, LORD, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered".

This is a reminder that God doesn't keep track of our past failures and sins. Each day is a new day with God! So each day we can choose to live the way God wants us to live. One can choose not to worry about the sins of the past or the sins you may commit next week but to focus

on how you are living right now. Once we have repented – that is, once we have changed our way of thinking and acting - God doesn't care about our past. God cares about our future. And our future can be secured when we live in His Kingdom and live for today.

One of the best illustrations of this is found in the children's book Because of Winn Dixie. Some of you may remember it because we used it as a parallel text to our study of Isaiah 43 last year. The main character of the book, ten-year old Opal, has befriended the man at the local pet store, Otis, who allowed her to work off the cost of a collar and leash for her dog, Winn Dixie. In the course of their friendship, she discovers that Otis has been in jail for a time. This really worries Opal.

She finally decides to confide in another friend, Gloria Dump, an old blind woman that she reads to in the afternoons. She asks Gloria if she should be afraid of Otis because he has been in jail. Gloria's answer is some of the best theology I have ever heard. She says, "You got to remember, you can't always judge people by the things they done. You got to judge them by what they are doing now."

Jesus tells us not to worry about what we have done wrong but try to do something better today! He tells us not to judge others too harshly for their mistakes because God, in his grace, does not judge *us* harshly. Jesus tells us to place our priorities on what we can do for God's kingdom TODAY and do it!

Now some people may say, aren't some things worth being anxious about – economics, providing for one's family, health issues, sustainability of the earth's resources? Well, Jesus says NO. We should all have SOS. In fact, he doesn't suggest it – he commands it. DO NOT WORRY is written in the imperative. Jesus says quite simply – DON'T DO IT!!!

And the best way of reconciling this in our minds is to remember that when we make God's kingdom our priority over worry, we are actually choosing God's Son. When we trust in Jesus and receive him as our Lord and Saviour we are born into his family and become children of God. We can be assured that God knows our every need. And if our loving Father knows our needs, we can trust him for them. Not our wants but certainly our needs.

Now please don't misunderstand me. I am not saying that we should live irresponsibly or not provide for our families as best we can. I am not saying we should exhaust the resources of God's creation without a care in the world. I am only saying that when we fully trust God as sovereign and righteous, we can believe that God will provide or show us a way to live in accordance with God's plan, making the best of what we have. Yet, even as God increases our awareness, it is our responsibility to seek the will of God and follow in obedience.

And in the end, worry is contradictory to faith. Faith and anxiety are like fire and water. I saw a sign once that said, "Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?" Faith means trust. Trust in God's care and provision. To be a Christian is to walk in a trusting relationship with God. But sin interferes with that relationship and leads to worry.

And God tells us over and over to trust in Him. God promises to provide for our needs if we get our priorities right. Indeed, the Bible is full of such promises. For example, the psalmist says, "No good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless" (Psalm 84:11). The apostle Paul also writes, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28). Sometimes, as Paul knew only too well and Jesus experienced, our situation may be difficult or painful. Yet God will walk with us and hold our hand and use adversity to build our character.

The result may be increased intimacy with God, greater spiritual insight or far deeper faith with which to encourage and affirm others. Worry misses the point of life, is illogical, incompatible with faith, and a complete waste of time. You may suspect that I wrote this sermon primarily to myself in hopes that it would also touch someone else in the congregation. So, if any of us you remain unconvinced, here is a great story.

The wealthy Baron Fitzgerald had only one son and heir, who died after leaving home. This was a tragedy from which the father never recovered. As his wealth increased, the Baron continued to invest in paintings by great masters, and when he died his will was found to call for all his paintings to be sold. Because of their quality and artistic value, messages were sent out to museums and collectors, advertising the sale.

When the day of the auction came, a large crowd assembled, among them was an old house servant who wondered how he would live with no income, now that the Baron had died. The lawyer read from Fitzgerald's will. It instructed that the first painting to be sold was that a portrait of his son.

When he saw the portrait of the young boy, whom he had loved and known, his heart went out and he bid a small amount for the portrait. Because it was by an unknown artist and of very poor quality, the servant was the only bidder. So, for a small sum of money, he won the bid. The attorney again read from the will, "Whoever buys my son gets all. The auction is over." Jesus said, "Seek first my Father's kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." That is how to stop worrying and start living.

So, as Scarlett and Jesus said, let us not be anxious about today but trust it to our Lord and loving God. Surely a God who would send his Son to live and die for our Eternal needs will be with us as we struggle and triumph in the earthly kingdom.

I don't often use prayers from our Common Book of Worship just as they are written. I prefer to personalize them to the situation for which I am leading worship. But one that I love is suggested for the close at a committal service at the grave and I use it each time I conduct a service there. I would like to close by sharing it with you. It is a prayer of complete trust in God.

“O Lord support us all the day long until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over and our work is done. Then in your mercy grant us a safe lodging and a holy rest and peace as the last, through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

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God of yesterday, we give you thanks for the blessings of our past. For the people who have nurtured and loved us, for those who have guided our way. We thank you for the grace of forgiveness and the chance to do better. We pray for those whom we have hurt, intentionally or even unknowingly, and pray that your grace has provided a way of healing for them.

God of today, we give you thanks for this moment when we come to you and in your holy presence give you the joys and concerns of our hearts and our world. We pray for those who are suffering because of circumstances beyond their control – illness, death, grief, oppression, tyranny, and poverty. Help them feel your presence in their lives, knowing that you are walking the paths of uncertainty with them. We pray for those who are suffering because they are confused, depressed, lonely and those struggling with addiction. Give them your strength to reach out for help and accept help that is offered.

We pray for our nation, her leaders and all the world. We know that you have given the care of your creation over to us and we often fail, so set us on the right path.

Lord we are so grateful for the men and women who have given their lives in service to this nation and who continue to do so, even now. Remind us each day to be thankful and aware that much of what we have was gained at a price that we can never imagine.

Gracious God, we give you thanks that see our sins and cover us with grace and righteousness that was purchased with the blood of your son. Help us be gracious to others and even to ourselves, knowing the price that our forgiveness has cost you.

God of tomorrow, thank you for the hope that you promise us each day. Help us know that we start afresh and anew in your eyes when we seek your kingdom rather than our own agendas. Draw our eyes, first, to you, that we may be reminded of the abundant life you have promised and provide and, second, to our neighbors, that we may see and respond to their need. In Jesus' name, Amen.