

Our daughter, Sharon, worked her way through college and graduate school as a server at various Don Pablos restaurants in the area--before they went out of business. She would often come home exhausted. I would ask her how her day went and she would say, "I was 'in the weeds' all day long," which means, she was so busy she was barely able to keep up and cope with all the things going on around her. Ever since then, "in the weeds" is a commonly heard phrase around our house. As I observe our society, I believe that's where many of us are, but it's not a new phenomenon. Even Jesus spoke about it.

Today is the third in the sermon series on the parables of Jesus. Telling stories was Jesus' way of helping us gain a better understanding of his teachings about living in the Kingdom of God. He would take familiar objects or situations and give them a spiritual application.

The story we read today from Matthew is called the "Parable of the Sower." It's also found in Mark and Luke. Many of Jesus' listeners at that time were farmers so they were well aware of the different kinds of soil. Any field could be a combination of rocky, shallow, weed-infested, or good soil. The better the soil, the more receptive it would be to the seed and a good harvest.

Jesus doesn't always interpret his parables, but later in the chapter he explains this one. Jesus tells how the fate of the Word of God depends on the hearer.

Many times we think of it in terms of four different kinds of people:

the closed-minded, ... the "flash in the pan," ...the worldly-minded, and...  
the receptive listeners.

However, as I consider myself and others, I think we fall into all of those categories at one time or another in our spiritual journey. I believe for most of us here the goal is to be the "good soil," or receptive, to hearing and applying the Word of God. We want to be and do what God wants in order to make our lives and outreach more effective. So, what's the problem?

As I was thinking about it this week, I've decided the most common reason I'm unreceptive is my penchant for "living in the weeds." As Jesus said, the Word of God is heard, but falls among the thorns or weeds and "the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful." Worry and anxiety sprout like weeds and thorns and grow up around the truth of God's Word, choking away the life and peace it can bring.

If we're honest, worries of all sorts often overwhelm us. We are overly busy during the day and then sometimes kept awake at night struggling to understand some person or situation. We're "too tired to keep running, but too busy to rest."

One stressed-out man said he slept like a baby: he awoke every two hours and cried! Without a doubt, we live in a time described in Virginia Brasier's words,

"This is the age of the half-read page,  
The quick hash and the mad dash;  
The bright night with the nerves tight;  
The plane hop with the brief stop;  
The lamp tan in a short span;  
The Big Shot in a good spot;

The brain strain and the heart pain;  
The catnaps till the spring snaps—And the fun’s done.”

It makes me tired just to read it!

So, how do we keep our lives in proper perspective so we can move out of the weeds and thorny issues we face daily and into more fruitful Kingdom living?

I want to take some time today to take a closer look at this problem, but also to look at a solution to keep us growing more productively.

I think part of the problem is we Americans are conditioned to believe if we work hard enough we can do anything or make anything happen. The only obstacle to success is finding the right technique. We become "control freaks."

For many people with this philosophy, impatience becomes a virtue.

But impose boundaries on these “shakers and movers,”

shut some doors,

give them something that won’t budge,

put them with people who won’t cooperate,

make changes they didn’t anticipate,

and they get overstressed and eventually all burned out—in a field full of weeds.

Some of us don’t choose that philosophy, but we may live or work in an environment where those perspectives are imposed upon us.

Ed Vergo, a major league baseball umpire reflects, “We’re supposed to be perfect our first day on the job, and then show constant improvement each day afterward.” Sound familiar?

Whether it’s being a student, a parent, a business or professional person, an athlete or coach, perfectionism reigns. Of course no one CAN be perfect, so we are constantly dealing with our own imperfections. But dealing with that lack of control over other people, circumstances, and especially God also chokes the life and enthusiasm out of us. When we confront the boundaries of age, illness, death, divorce, our own mistakes, or other people’s demands, and we push against those boundaries, we become resentful, cynical and stressed out.

Adding to the problem, *The New York Times* reported the average American is exposed to 3,500 commercial messages every day in various media, all of them saying variations of: “You don’t have enough. You need more. Our product will change your life. Keep working, harder and harder, so you can acquire more and more.” It’s a lie. That kind of deceitful thinking also keeps us "in the weeds."

Is there a solution to these human problems? Are we doomed to live in the weeds and rarely experience the fruitful harvest of the good soil?

God can show us a way. With God there is always hope.

Part of that solution comes in understanding that even though technology makes this present life more complex, life has never been “simple.” There is no such thing as “the good ‘ol days.” From the beginning of time, people have struggled with issues of physical survival, money needs, and relational interaction. Life will always have its complications, so thinking we can eliminate all stress is unrealistic.

Frederick Buechner says to tell a person not to worry is like telling a person with a head cold not to sneeze. We worry. So, the goal is not to be rid of all concerns, but to learn how to manage them. How does a realistic Christian do that?

It begins by realizing it's not always the size of a problem that overwhelms us, but how long we insist on carrying it.

A teacher was giving a lecture to his students on stress management. He raised a glass of water and asked, “**How heavy do you think this glass of water is?**” The answers ranged from several ounces to a couple pounds. He responded, “It doesn't matter. Absolute weight doesn't determine my ability to hold this glass. It depends on how long I hold it. If I hold it for a **minute**, it's OK. If I hold it for an **hour**, my arm will hurt. If I hold it for a **day**, you'll have to call an ambulance. It's the **exact same weight, but the longer I hold it, the heavier it becomes**. What I have to do is put the glass down and rest for a while before holding it up again.”

I know we still have to deal with our concerns, but if we carry our worries and stress all the time, the burden becomes increasingly heavier and sooner or later we'll not be able to function. We have to put down the burden periodically, so we can be refreshed and are able to continue. We Christians know there is a place of rest, a place to lay the burden down, a place where a Person Who is wiser than we can offer insight and a new perspective. That place is in the prayer presence of God, but too often—we ignore it or hesitate to go there because we're too busy or don't have the time.

Author Hannah Whitall Smith writes, “It's not hard ... to trust the management of the universe ... to the Lord. Can your case then be so much more complex and difficult that you need to be anxious or troubled about God's management of you?” Yet we do often think our situation is either too petty or too difficult for God. If we can't solve things ourselves, we doubt God can--or will.

We **believe** in God, but that isn't the same as **trusting** in God. Believing is a choice we make. Trusting God comes from experiencing that choice over and over again. Trust is earned.

Time and again I remind myself, either God is for real—or He's not. If not, I'm wasting my time and a career. If God is for real, then I need to act like it. I need to do what I can do to be responsible about my concerns and then pray and surrender those worries to God's control. I need to review--and trust--those verses in scripture that say,

“**Be still** and know that I am God.” (Ps. 46:10), Be Still.

“**Cast** all your anxieties on Him, for He cares about you.” (1 Pet 5:7)

“When I am afraid, I will **trust** in you. (Ps. 56:3)

I particularly like Eugene Peterson's version in The Message of Paul's directive to the Philippians (4:6-7), “Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.”

Of course it's not just a one-time prayer or a one-time scripture reading that will keep us on track. Any gardener knows keeping the weeds from taking over the good plants is an ongoing chore until time for the harvest. Investing time in prayer, scripture and other readings to keep us focused above our worries is a daily, sometimes minute-by-minute process.

Worry is a habit; so is prayer. It takes persistent practice to get rid of a bad habit or take on a good one. As we keep at it, we can learn to relinquish control--or transfer ownership of the situation--to God. In Martin Luther's words, "Pray, and let God worry!" We can have the assurance we are in the hands of One who sees beyond the here and now and has the power to work things out for our good.

That was the confidence Fanny Crosby held 132 years ago when her friend, Phoebe Knapp, came to the blind poet and hymn writer with a new tune for her to hear. After playing the tune several times, Phoebe asked, "What does this tune say, Fanny?" She turned to see Fanny kneeling in prayer. Then the blind woman responded, "It says, 'Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!'" Then she went on to write the rest of the well-known hymn we'll sing today.

The two women came from entirely different social backgrounds, but both were assured of Jesus' love for them and his ability to care for them and their worries. They learned to rest in that assurance and sang, "This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long."

So what is the hope for those of us who occasionally find ourselves in the weeds of worry and anxiety?

It's the blessed assurance the fruitful life of peace and joy is not based on our feelings, our circumstances, nor our obsession with our own needs and problems.

It's not a question of what is our assurance.

It's WHO is our assurance.

You might say, it's God's own version of being—a **weed-eater!**