

Be Anxious No More

Matthew 6:24-34

May 25, 2008

I.

Tomorrow people all across America will celebrate our heritage of freedom. With flags, and bands, and parades we will remember the men and women who gave their lives to preserve that freedom. Our Eucharist today, which always is devoted to the glory and presence of our Lord, also will be observed with special intention for the memory of those brave Americans.

The Collect of the Day at the beginning of the service sets the stage for today's Gospel. We asked God to preserve us from faithless fears and worldly anxieties, and prayed that no clouds of this mortal life would hide us from the light of his love.

A message like that can be very comforting. Many of you might remember the catchy little song, "Don't Worry, Be Happy" by Bobby McFerrin. It won the Grammy Award for "Best Song of the Year" in 1989. The lyrics were about living for the moment, being laid back, focusing on yourself, and taking things as they come. But is that what Jesus meant in today's reading from Matthew? No, it is not, and later I will use a couple more song titles to develop this point.

II.

Today's Gospel is part of the well-known Sermon on the Mount, which contains some central principles of Christian life. In this part, Jesus was teaching his disciples how their possessions, worries, and anxieties could get in the way of their relationship with God. And he shined the spotlight directly on the tension between dealing with worldly concerns and living in faith.

And if you recall last month's newsletter, you might have some idea of what I'm going to say because I used this passage from Matthew as the basis for my monthly article before I realized it also was today's Gospel.

The first part of our reading sets us up for the last part. It tells us what not to do, and follows with an affirmative instruction. To begin, Jesus said we cannot serve two masters. We cannot serve God and wealth. We cannot have divided loyalties between worldly things and godly things. Then he said not to worry, not to have anxieties or concerns about the basics in our lives. Finally, he told us instead to seek God's kingdom, and he will provide for us.

This Gospel certainly presents lofty goals and high ideals. But, does it also raise some questions in our minds? Are we being asked to be foolishly optimistic or unrealistically hopeful? The reading proclaims that we should not worry, God will take care of us. No problems. But does that always happen? I recall that last Thursday's headline in the *Sun Herald* declared "Graduating Senior Dies on I-10."

And could I preach this Gospel to the poor and hungry? Could I go to Somalia or Mozambique and tell the people there not to worry about what they're going to eat?

Finally, how do we seek first the kingdom, anyway? If we seek it first is there something else we can seek second? And where is this kingdom? Is it on a map? Can we google it? How do we understand this reading? Let's look at what Jesus said.

III.

The core of today's message is not to worry, and to set aside our anxieties because God will provide. This should be taken absolutely seriously, but not absolutely literally. Certainly, we can worry about our golf score in a tournament in which we are playing. Or we could be extremely

anxious when the Saints are behind by one touchdown and have the ball fourth and one on the Cowboys' three yard line with twenty seconds left in the game.

But how important are those concerns the day after the tournament, or the day after the game? Haven't we moved on to other things? And aren't we looking forward with hopeful anticipation to the next tournament or the next game?

Jesus was not talking about these kinds of anxieties. He used examples of money, food, drink, and clothing. These are the essentials, aren't they? These are the issues that are more likely to occupy peoples' thoughts and draw them away from trusting God and living in a relationship with him.

And he used birds and flowers to make the point that if God will so abundantly care for them, then there is no doubt that he will care for us. He also mentioned King Solomon, who was legendary for his wealth and possessions, and basically said all that did not compare to God's provision for us.

But this reading also is not a call to laziness, or indifference, or carelessness. Jesus did not ask his disciples to give up working and just sit back to await whatever God might do. His teaching was addressed to what is important and what is not. He wanted to make clear who they should seek first. It was a matter of priorities. He wanted his disciples to know that if they only worried about the world, they would not know God. If, on the other hand, they made God their first priority, then they also would lack for nothing they needed.

IV.

So, we are called to apply this reading to our lives today. However, two very powerful and very subtle cultural realities draw us away from what God wants. One is the desire to get ahead and succeed in the world, and the other is how suffering in the world can sometimes make us question whether we always can turn to God.

Let's consider the first for a moment. We all have ambitions, and desires, and hopes for a good life. And in pursuing those goals, it can be easy to rely on ourselves and leave God out of the equation. We can be so caught up in the quest to impress or be praised by others that we forget who and what really counts.

Earlier I mentioned how song titles were particularly applicable to today's reading. We all have heard Frank Sinatra sing "I did it my way." And from a worldly perspective that idea can be superficially inspiring. Obviously, however, if everyone in the world tried to do things his or her way, there would be total chaos. Today's reading wants us instead to say "I did it God's way."

Therein lies the challenge for all of us. We know that God wants us to prosper and be happy. But he also wants to have a relationship with us. How can we do both? As the Gospel tells us, it's a matter of priorities. We are called to put God first, and then all else will follow.

I'm a fan of bumper stickers. They often condense a paragraph of thought into a few pertinent words. And I can think of two bumper stickers that reflect the choices in today's reading. The first, which was born of the worldly excesses of the 1970's said "Whoever dies with the most toys wins." The other, more spiritually centered, said "The best things in life are not things."

And this choice squarely presents the question of how we live a Christian life in a secular world. It's only natural to think that by making money and buying things we are providing for ourselves and our families. We believe we are taking care of our responsibilities. And that's true, as far as it goes. God wants us to do that.

But it can be hard to stop at that point. If we are not careful our blessings can turn into problems. The earthly messages of today's culture are so dominant and overwhelming that we can be lured to look right past the godly promises of the kingdom to which we aspire. It can be very easy to put God on the back burner if we think we are self-sufficient and can do everything for ourselves.

The other barrier that can get in the way of our faith is the reality of suffering in the world. At the beginning of this sermon I alluded to the tragic loss of a young man's life, and the horrible poverty in Africa. Even though God did not cause these tragedies, they can tempt us to put God aside and then we fall victim to the anxieties and worries, and even doubts, that the Gospel calls us to forsake.

Consider, for example, a scenario with which we probably all are familiar, personally or by association. We take a medical test, or someone we know takes a test, and we won't know the results for a while. And we worry, even though the Gospel tells us, and we instinctively know, that worrying will not affect the results of the test either way.

And what if the results are not good? Do we still continue to believe today's reading, that God will provide for us? This is my last reference to music today. Some of you might recall the 1969 Rolling Stones hit song, "You can't always get what you want, but you get what you need." Although the context of those lyrics was not what Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel, they make the point in a contemporary way.

God will give us what we need in this broken world. He either will give us the resources and outcomes that we desire, or he will enable us to do without them or deal with the circumstances. He will be with the friends and family of that Pascagoula High School senior, and he will make hunger more bearable for those with no food, even though we live in a world full of food.

In the same way, using the medical test example, we all pray that God will give us good health as long as we live. And through his grace that might happen. But if it doesn't, he will give us the ability to understand and cope with it, even though we might not see it in the beginning.

V.

Our reading ends with Jesus calling us to seek God's kingdom, having faith that he will provide. I believe that seeking means trusting in this context. We are to trust that God's kingdom is on its way, and will fully be here when Jesus comes again. Then we will have what we need, and then only good things will happen to good people.

In the meantime, however, we are to trust in God and accept the blessings of his grace as those blessings are received. He will strengthen and support us, and his comfort will overcome our worries and fears. Even so, however, we are not promised freedom from illness or calamity, and we know that life's problems will continue. Evil still lurks in the world. But today's Gospel gives us hope, and can reassure us when we are in need.

Certainly we are called to work hard, do the best we can, make wise decisions, and care for our families. And we know that life is a series of steps forward and steps back. But in the end, if we are faithful, and if we do our part, then there will be more forward steps than backward, and God will give us what we need. *Amen.*