

In God We Trust

Matthew 6:24-34

February 27, 2011

I.

God says not to worry about our money. And our money says, "In God We Trust." That truth was preserved on our bills even after they recently were redesigned. Our trust in God is eternal.

And today's readings confirm what our currency proclaims. The Collect of the Day at the start of the service set the stage. 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.

Then the Gospel tells us that if God so abundantly will care for birds and flowers, there is no doubt he will care for us. Concern and anxiety about worldly things will not help because we can count on God to provide the things that are important. Do not worry, he said, about what we will eat, or drink, or wear.

These words about what to wear reminds me of a Baptist preacher trying to get a fellow to come to church. The man said he didn't have proper clothes, and so the preacher bought him a new suit. The fellow still did not show up, and when the preacher saw him he asked about it. The fellow said, "Well, when I got dressed up I looked so good I went to the Episcopal Church."

I hope that's not our church's image in society, and I know it's not the case at St. Thomas, even though you all look very nice. But that story, and today's reading, shines the spotlight on the tension between our instincts to try to control our lives, and the reality that God is in control.

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. It was about living for the moment, being laid back, focusing on yourself, and taking things as they come. But I don't think that's what Jesus meant in today's reading from Matthew.

Instead, one of today's communion hymns says it more appropriately. You will recognize it when you hear it. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, [and] all these things will be added unto you."

II.

Today's Gospel is part of the well-known Sermon on the Mount, which contains many central principles of Christian life. It also sets forth some difficult sayings. We heard a few of them two weeks ago; instructions to turn the other cheek, to love our enemies, and to go the extra mile. And today Jesus said to turn aside from worries or anxieties that cannot change anything anyway.

During this part of the Sermon Jesus was teaching how concerns about ourselves and our possessions could get in the way of our relationships with God. He began by saying we cannot serve two masters. We cannot serve God when we worry about worldly things. Then, he said, loyalty to God brings what we need in the world. It's simply a matter of priorities.

These certainly are lofty goals and high ideals, aren't they? But do they also raise questions for us? Are we being asked to be foolishly optimistic or unrealistically hopeful? These are reassuring words on Sunday morning, but what about the other days of the week? Can we really believe that we should not worry and God will take care of us? Does that always happen?

And could I preach this Gospel to the poor and hungry? Could I go to Sudan or Uganda and tell people there not to worry about what, or even when, they're going to eat? Or could I say to some of the people who come in the church seeking assistance that they should not be anxious? Could I tell them not to worry about whether Coast Electric disconnects their service?

And finally, how do we seek first the kingdom, anyway? What is this kingdom, and where is it? Is it on a map? Can we google it? Or is it only something in the future? Once again we are faced with trying to understand a difficult reading. So let's look at it in a little more detail.

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 to extremes. Certainly, we might be concerned about our golf score, or anxious when the Saints are one touchdown behind and have the ball fourth and one on the Cowboys' three yard line with eight seconds left.

But Jesus obviously was not talking about those kinds of anxieties. He used examples of money, food, drink, and clothing. These are essentials, aren't they? Ensuring that these needs are met is more likely to occupy our thoughts and draw us away from a relationship with God.

And he used birds and flowers to make the point that if God so completely cares for them, he certainly will care for us. He also mentioned King Solomon, who was legendary for his wealth and possessions, and said all that magnificence was not comparable to God's provision for us.

But two points should be made. The first is that this reading is not a call to indifference, or laziness, or carelessness. Jesus did not ask his disciples to give up working and sit back and do nothing. And he does not ask us to do that either. We still have to make the effort.

And the second is that worrying and planning are two different things. Worrying truly does not help anything. But planning can be essential. As Christians we are called to take our faith seriously, and to thoughtfully and deliberately consider our actions. We can pray for God's guidance as we plan, but obviously we would not ask God to help us worry.

So, today's teaching speaks to what is important and what is not. It tells us that if we only worry about things of the world, we will not fully know God's love for us. Anxieties and worries can become preoccupations and obsessions that lead us further into darkness and away from the Lord. We cannot open our hearts to God when our minds are only on ourselves.

IV.

And we know it can be difficult to apply this reading in real life. In my own experience we can be tested in at least three ways. The first involves things. The second relates to our families. And the third applies to our health. Perhaps some of you might think of additional areas.

Let's consider the first. We all have ambitions, and desires for a good life. And in pursuing those goals we can be tempted to rely on ourselves and leave God on the back burner. After all, we are responsible to care for ourselves and our families. And this can lead us to focus on worldly measures of success while overlooking what really counts.

Earlier I mentioned some song titles. Here's another. We probably have heard Frank Sinatra sing "I did it my way." And even though the theme of that song projects empty pride and hubris, it can seem superficially inspiring. We might say things like that to each other.

But we cannot say it to God. God will not be impressed. And so today's reading goes beneath that fragile and phony surface of the song, and it asks us instead to say "I did it God's way."

And there is 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, put God first, and then all else will follow.

That's especially true with family problems. Concerns for our families are a natural outgrowth of love for them. But the reading tells us that worrying a single hour won't change anything. That doesn't mean we don't try to help, but sometimes our help doesn't work. What then?

Well, these situations can call for tough decisions, and sometimes they must be made one way or the other. But worry and anxiety contribute nothing to the process. Seek guidance instead through the Holy Spirit and have faith that God will provide the better answers.

And we also know that worry and anxiety are not good for our health, and can make difficult situations even worse, which leads to the third area

Most of us have taken medical tests, or know someone else who has, and we won't know the results for a while. And we worry, even though the Gospel tells us, and we already instinctively know, that worrying will not affect the results of the test either way.

And frequently the results are good. But what if they are not what we hoped? Do we still continue to believe today's reading, that God will provide for us? Again I can refer to music.

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 will grant us the resources and outcomes that we desire, or else will strengthen us to continue on and persevere through the difficulties.

And we all pray that God will give us good health as long as we live. Through his grace that could happen. But if it doesn't, he will give us the ability to understand and cope with it, even though we might not think so in the beginning.

V.

Finally, our reading ends with Jesus calling us to seek God's kingdom, having faith that he will provide. And of course one way to think about God's kingdom is to anticipate that glorious day when Jesus comes again. There is no doubt that then we will have what we need, and only good things will happen to good people.

But God's kingdom is more than a future anticipation; it also is a present day reality. It is the unlimited deposit of God's love in the world, made through his son, Jesus Christ, against which we always can draw to overcome our worries and anxieties.

God's love is in the bank, so to speak, right there for us. And we all have an account at that bank and never can be overdrawn. There are no monthly fees. God's love is waiting there to be transferred to us and make us rich in ways that transcend worldly worries.

He will strengthen and support us, and his comfort will overcome our fears. Even so, however, we are not promised freedom from illness or troubles, and we know that life's problems will continue. Evil still lurks in the world. But today's Gospel gives us assurance and hope.

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 we will move forward more than back, and God will give us what we need. *Amen.*