

Pentecost II, Proper 3 May 25, 2008

This is one of those hard sermons to do. (I'll talk about why in a minute). The Gospel is from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, and that means Jesus is talking about his vision of what human life can be; about what it is like to live in the Kingdom of God. I believe that Jesus is serious here, that he is giving us some hints of how we can live *now* so that, by living this way now, we can *practice* for living in the kingdom eternally. He is trying to teach us a few steps of the dance that God has written for us to spend eternity learning and using. So, the Sermon on the Mount is a big deal—it's about how the one we call Lord calls us to live—and we're from Texas, and we don't like *anybody* telling us how to live. That's hard enough.

To make it even harder, Jesus is talking specifically about stuff—money, food, clothes, cars, houses, wealth, savings accounts, residual assets, retirement plans, that sort of stuff. And, let's face it, whenever this particular topic comes up, we tend to get twitchy. It's something we usually suspect we have a better handle on than Jesus ever did. After all, this is real; really real; and it cuts both ways.

On the one hand, most of us can wonder: "Aren't I entitled to the things I've earned? Does Jesus really want me to impoverish myself and ignore my family's security?" On the other hand, there are lots and lots of folks who can ask things like: "Hey, I've been out of work for a long time, I'm sick; is God going to pay my bills for me?" Let's face it, the birds of the air and the lilies of the field are not always in the best of shape. These are good, honest questions, and the fact is, we have to deal with them.

Jesus seems to be speaking to all of this when he says, "do not be anxious", "do not worry". Swell, like maybe we don't read the newspapers. We know that when W. H. Auden's first called modernity "the age of anxiety" over fifty years ago, he didn't know the half of it. And what's more, each of us has our own stories that show Auden was an optimist. So where do we go with all of this talk about not serving wealth, and not being anxious?

Do we just write it off as unrealistic—as a sort of unapproachable ideal that might be nice some day, but doesn't fit the complex realities we have to deal with every day?

I don't think so, and I don't think so for at least two reasons. First of all, Jesus said all of this in first century Palestine—and, if you think about it, those folks had a lot more to be anxious about than we do. The sort of “If we're lucky today, maybe we'll be able both to eat and not get killed” subsistence poverty that was the norm back then is, quite honestly, incomprehensible to us. So if *we* think Jesus was being unrealistic, imagine how he must have sounded back then.

Second of all, maybe it shouldn't make sense. That is, whatever life God will have us live, whatever vision God may have for us, this probably won't match up with common sense; it probably won't give us suggestions about how to make life the way we and our culture want it to be. If there is one thing that all the great religious traditions of humanity have in common it is the notion that God is different enough from us to suggest that the life God recommends will be different from the life that our world and our culture hold up to us and want us to seek. Otherwise, why bother?

Everybody from the Ancient Hindu writers through the prophets of Israel to Confucius and the Buddha, and certainly including Jesus, these all tell us that somehow we have it wrong, that we don't have the best, the most honest, the most rewarding way to live at our fingertips. They all say, in one way or another, that there is something more, something different, something better for us if we will just allow our minds and our souls to be transformed; if we will just jump off the particular cliff they are pointing to.

So, just because what Jesus is saying in the Sermon on the Mount seems unrealistic and weird doesn't mean he wasn't serious. It just means that he was either crazy or speaking the truth of God. Let's go with door number two.

One way into this is by looking at what Jesus is not saying. First of all, Jesus is not saying that the stuff he is talking about is evil or unimportant—just that it's spiritually dangerous and not of ultimate importance. Second, Jesus is not saying that there is something wrong with planning for the future. Planning for the future is one of *today's* duties, and there is nothing wrong with, and a whole lot right about, doing that.

Also, these words of Jesus don't mean we shouldn't care—either about our own physical needs or those of others; and he is not saying that the physical world, and physical things in general are unimportant or superficial. Finally, none of this is an excuse for laziness or for blithely pontificating that 'the Lord will provide' and that we have no role to play in such matters. That's just silly. | | So, what's left?

What's left is subtle, but very familiar. What's left is investing our energy, our attention, our imagination our *lives*, in something other than today—in what has not happened or what might happen; or in what has already happened and cannot be changed. What's left is being anxious about our selves and our stuff—about what we have and what we don't have and what we get and what we might lose and things like that. What's left is emotionally rehearsing the future—as if such exercises give us security, power or control. Again, we know about this; it is something that is so drilled into us by our culture and our own inborn sinfulness that it seems both natural and inevitable, if not positively wise.

So, what Jesus offers us in this, and every, part of the Sermon on the Mount is a radical reorientation of the core of our lives; so that what used to matter most, ourselves and our stuff, no longer matters most.

And just to push one more of our buttons, what Jesus offers instead of our anxiety is not what we would like him to offer—we would like a guarantee that we will always get what we desire (or even what we think we need). Jesus knew better than that, and so do we; nor does Jesus suggest a grinning, imbecilic, Alfred E. Neuman existence that keeps saying “What, me worry?”.

Instead, what Jesus offers as his alternative to anxiety is trust—not the assurances of our own good fortune, but trust in God’s final and ultimate compassion, care and love for us and for all of God’s creation. It is trust, faith if you will, that stands in sharpest contrast to anxiety; and is its only honest alternative. And this is a sort of fuzzy trust—it is the conviction that the beating heart of all creation is neither cold indifference or some abstract, indifferent unmoved mover. The beating heart of the universe is the passionate, searching and never failing love of the God, the God of Abraham, the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The God who cares and acts.

This trust, this faith, is for the long haul, and it is without preconceptions about what our future will look like. Anything can happen to anybody, as we so well know; and “tomorrow will [indeed] bring worries of its own”. But such trust is real, and it will not fail. It is both a gift that must be sought and a virtue, an habitual way of living, that itself requires grace.

What Jesus offers is the easily stated but deeply challenging reality suggested by some silly, simple, slogans I have come to rely on—things like ‘one day at a time’, and ‘let go and let God’. Or, expressed more theologically, it is the fact that the presence, grace, and strength of God is something we can know only in the present moment, and never in the past or in the future.

As I have said all along, this is difficult; it is a real and constant challenge, one I struggle with every day. (I like my stuff, my plans and my preferences.) I sort of regret to say that I have generally, not always, but generally, found this sort of trust lived out more completely and faithfully in places like AA and Alanon than in the Church. (Which is sort of OK because AA stole its program from traditional Christianity, anyway.)

Still, I am convinced that how we set our priorities and orient our selves is very important to the quality of the lives we live, and will live; and I am also convinced that Jesus is on to something big—both when he warns us away from stuff and our own selves as the first priority of our lives and when he points to anxiety as a clear sign that we may have strayed a bit from the vision of life our faith offers.

These words of Jesus point to a real and viable part of how our Lord calls to live—replacing worry and anxiety with an abiding trust that, at the end of the day, things will be all right; and so living with the conviction that what is most important, what needs to come first if we are to live sanely and with the gift of real joy, is God—God’s love, God’s care, and God’s gift and call to us of self-giving love.

It’s all very easy to say, and very hard to do—but it is also the way of life, and the way of peace.