

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by The Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, February 27, 2011.

(Isaiah 49:8-16a; I Corinthians 4:1-5; Matthew 6:24-34)

I hope we all had a chance to hear the words of the Collect that was prayed at the beginning of the service. And if you weren't paying attention and your mind was elsewhere -- I admit sometimes that even happens to me in the service -- I will close with the words of that wonderful Collect prayer that we don't hear very often. In this prayer, we remind ourselves that God wills us to quote, "cast all our care on you who care for us." And our scripture lesson from the Gospel according to Matthew says it this way, "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness."

This Gospel reading picks up in the middle of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount which we've been hearing in installments over the last several weeks. And in this sermon, Jesus has been describing the kingdom of God and his righteousness, the standards of God's heavenly rule. Blessed are the poor in spirit, be a light for others, seek peace and reconciliation. We are valued not by our worldly power or outward piety, our wealth or reputation, our merit is found in our mercy. The righteous riches of God's kingdom are wholeness and peace, not earthly treasures.

Jesus continues the sermon with the reading this morning with a word about worry. "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, what you will drink, what you will wear. Instead, strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness." Jesus is basically saying you don't have anything to worry about if you're living under God's roof. There's no need to worry. Even the birds and the flowers have it pretty good. So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring troubles of its own.

But why do we worry? I mean, I think we get it. I know worrying is not good. I should just stay in the present moment. But why do we stumble under the weight of our cares instead of casting them upon the one who truly cares for us? We know that life doesn't have to be as complicated as we make it when we worry, and yet we just can't help ourselves. We would sometimes rather worry than truly trust in God's kingdom, God's compassion and mercy. We might wonder if we can really trust God. "God, if I cast my cares on you, will you worry about them as well as I can?" After all, we look around and we see lots of hungry people, people in need of clothing and shelter. God may care for the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, but there are lots of people suffering mightily. Injustice flourishes as we see dictators oppressing their people, we are still subject to illness and injury and death. So where is the kingdom of God and God's righteousness? We have good reasons to worry.

We hear this worry pretty clearly in the Old Testament lesson we heard from Isaiah this morning. There's this wonderful part at the beginning. God has been talking about relieving the suffering of God's children in exile, those children of Zion, and yet they still say, "The Lord has forsaken me. My Lord has forgotten me." They're worried. They worry that God will not keep God's promises to relieve them. And the Lord's response to these worried children is one of the most tender in scripture. Listen to this again. "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no

compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands." God keeps us so close we are practically carved into God's hands.

God is like our mother -- you know, people sometimes say, "I don't know about this feminine imagery of God stuff. It's in the Bible. Here it is. God is like our mother and we are worried. We are like her worried and anxious children. We don't understand when mother does not provide what feels so urgent and necessary to us. We cry with worry because we fear maybe mother has forgotten to feed us. Maybe we're uncomfortable in our own mess. God, we got a stinky diaper down here. Humanity's got some major issues going on. Can we trust that God has not forgotten us? Can we believe that God cares for us more than a mother cares for her nursing child? More than we even care for ourselves? Can we trust?

There is no magic pill for faith. There are no special words to conjure up this sense of trusting, no fairy dust to chase away the worry. But I do love the Psalm we read today. The brief but powerful Psalm 131 as a touchstone in a time of worry. Our rendering of it in the Book of Common Prayer goes: "O Lord, I am not proud; I have no haughty looks. I do not occupy myself with great matters, or with things that are too hard for me. But I still my soul and make it quiet, like a child upon its mother's breast; my soul is quieted within me. O Israel, wait upon the Lord, from this time forth for evermore." The Psalm implies don't be proud. "Still my soul and make it quiet, like a child upon its mother's breast; wait for the Lord." I invite us to consider how we can make these words our own.

You know, the worry that gets the best of me is what I might call the "worry of hurry." I have a list of urgent tasks, and I wake up in the middle of the night worried about how I'm ever going to get it all done. I'm sure none of you have this same experience, but if you'll just bear with me for a minute. Sometimes I even lay in bed worrying instead of getting up to start working on whatever needs to be done. Again, I know you have trouble imagining this, but try, please. So how in the midst of my worry about how I will have to hurry to get it all done, how do I still my soul and make it quiet? How do I acquire the trust of a child resting on its mother's breast and wait upon the Lord?

One practice that I rediscovered during my sabbatical time away and that I've tried -- and I emphasize the word "tried" because I fail many more times than I succeed -- the practice of putting prayerful obstacles in the path of hurry. Just when there's so much urgency to get everything done, just when it seems like there's not enough time, with the grace of God, I stop and I pray. Oftentimes I pray the Lord's prayer very, very slowly. Jesus teaches this prayer just before this reading in the Sermon on the Mount. And it takes a minute, a whole 60 seconds, which if you're in a hurry is a long time. And I'll be honest with you, it doesn't make the worry go away. What this little speed bump of prayer does is to place my worry into a greater context.

Thy kingdom come, thy kingdom with its righteousness, thy will be done, O Lord, on earth as it is heaven. Give us this day, today, us, all of us, our daily bread. Let tomorrow's troubles be enough for tomorrow. Let today's troubles be enough for today. There's a bigger world than my list of urgent tasks. There's a grander vision than my limited sight, and God is somehow keeping it all together. So I say with the Psalmist, I do not occupy myself with things that are too hard

for me. I admit, Lord, I'm ignorant. Again, I fail at this practice many more times than I succeed. I probably charge on ten times for the one time that I actually stop. But each time we stop, the worry loses a bit of its power. Each time we pause, we keep ourselves from mindlessly charging on into the world. We cast our care upon the one who cares for us. Each time we can, by God's grace, actually stop to breathe and pray in a world of worry and hurry, our hearts are slowly changed. We are slowly, bit by bit, transformed. So we ask God to give us hearts that can love as well as they can worry. We ask God to give us grace to still our souls that we may strive first for the kingdom of God and rest like children in its compassionate righteousness.

I'll close with these words of the opening Collect prayer. Let us pray. "Most loving Father, may I say most loving Mother, whose will it is for us to give thanks for all things, to fear nothing but the loss of you, and to cast all our care on you who care for us: Preserve us from faithless fears and worldly anxieties, that no clouds of this mortal life may hide from us the light of that love which is immortal, and which you have manifested to us in your Son Jesus Christ our Lord." Amen.