

Epiphany 8, YrA, 022711
All Saints Episcopal Church

Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life.

In the name of the One who creates, redeems and makes us holy. Amen.

*Here's a little song I wrote,
You might want to sing it note by note,
Don't worry, Be happy. (Bobby McFerrin)*

Good morning!

So...for most of the week I've been singing this song, either out loud or in my head, so I thought I should spread it around to you! (I was hoping the choir might spontaneously join in with the *do do do do da da do* part, but I didn't get to them on time! Anyway, there it is!)

Let's talk about worry. About anxiety. In today's gospel, we continue with the Sermon on the Mount, and Jesus tells his listeners to not be anxious about earthly things. God takes care of the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, and so God will take care of us, too. However, telling people in this day and age not to be anxious about anything is like telling people not to breathe anymore. It's almost ridiculous.

As a culture, we are some of the best worriers on the planet. We worry about things that are important, of course, such as, how will I pay for my house since I have lost my job, and, how will I get through this very serious illness, and, what can I do when I have no money to buy food for my children. Those are very important things and deserve our attention.

But we also worry - we're anxious about - things that probably aren't worth the energy we expend on them...like what am I going to wear to the Mardi Gras ball - I simply can't wear the same dress as last year... or what is going to happen to that poor girl Lindsay Lohan...or what if my favorite person doesn't make the cut on American Idol (or any of the other so-called "reality" shows)...or do you think Donald Trump will get a better hairdo if he decides to run for president next year...or what if I'm late, I hate it when I'm late...or what can I do about the crack in my windshield that is growing at a pretty rapid rate...or, you can just fill in the blank.

Why do we worry so much about things that matter so little in the grand scheme of things? We've all heard this passage before: Consider the birds of the air, the lilies of the field. God takes care of them, so why should we worry about what we eat or what we wear?

Here's what Eugene Peterson says in the contemporary translation, *The Message*:

If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don't fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body.

Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? All this time and money wasted on fashion—do you think it makes that much difference? Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them.

If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers—most of which are never even seen—don't you think he'll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you? What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God's giving. People who don't know God and the way [God] works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how [God] works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.

Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.

This kind of contemporary language, at least for me, usually always hits home a little more than other translations of the Bible. It's pretty tough in places: don't be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God's giving. In other words, quit complaining and consider a little thanks-giving instead.

Although this passage will be perceived differently by those who have enough and those who do not, the meaning is really the same: don't spend your time and energy and heart fretting - that's worrying - about this stuff. If you have enough, be thankful, and beware of making an idol of having what you want, rather than merely what you need. If you don't have enough, don't think it is because God doesn't love you. That is a trap we fall into easily, especially if we are prey to any of those 'prosperity gospel' preachers on TV who tell us that as long as we do things that please God, God will give us whatever we want - a bigger apartment, a better job. And if we don't do what God wants, God will make us suffer. That is simply wrong thinking!

No, what Jesus wants us to know is that God's desire for us is that we all have enough. We can't serve two masters. We have to decide what our priorities and values are. If we're going to follow Jesus, then our priorities and values should probably not be focused on ourselves. Jesus is saying, 'Look beyond the boundaries of ourselves.'

If we are sitting at the top of the comfort scale, we should not be worrying about getting more, but about how to share what we have. If we sit at the bottom of that scale, we should not regard that as permission to lie, cheat, and steal our way to comfort. We still have to be responsible for actions we take and do the right thing. But more than a moral admonishment, this passage claims God's care for everything God has made: people, lilies, the birds, you name it. While we have ample evidence that God doesn't prevent disaster, Jesus assures us that God is deeply concerned with the lives God has created. In other words, we are not alone, no matter how bad things seem. And no matter how good things seem, we didn't get there on our own. God's love suffuses all creation. God's careful design shows up in everything.

The Sermon on the Mount is not only subversive to the values of empire; it's a set of marching orders for those who want to follow Jesus. There is a lot of bad stuff going on in the world; this was true in Jesus' century, just as it's true in ours. Jesus' teaching in the face of all that is wrong with the world is consistent: have faith, and do something about the bad stuff by doing all the good stuff you can.

Today's gospel is part of a larger message, and part of Jesus' challenge to his hearers and to us: life in the kingdom of God has different values from life in the empire, or life in a profit-based society. Life in the kingdom of God includes the poor, the merciful, those who mourn. Life in the kingdom of God includes our privilege and duty to bear light to the darkest parts of the world, to salt the world with mercy and justice. Today's gospel, taken outside this context, sounds unrealistic to someone who is suffering. In the larger context of this entire teaching, however, Jesus is reminding his followers - and us - of God's profound love for everything and everyone God has created, and encouraging his followers - and us - to focus on the kingdom of God.

What Jesus proclaims is that the kingdom of God is at hand. Grace and mercy are available to all. For those who already have much, it may well be that God's grace and mercy come through us on their way to those who are in the deepest need. What an awesome responsibility! And what an amazing joy - to be a conduit for the care and love of God for God's people and God's world. Even Solomon in all his glory didn't shine as brightly as those who share and give and work for the kingdom of God.

Thanks be to God.