

Sunday, May 25, 2008

2 Pentecost

St. John's Episcopal Church

Rev. Dr. Heidi Joos

Of all the rather difficult and challenging teachings of Jesus, the one in this morning's Gospel lesson seems like one of the hardest. "Do not worry about your life..." Or as earlier translations had it, "Do not be anxious..." Speaking as a psychiatrist and a fairly anxious person in my own right, I experience this command as almost impossible even to take in, let alone to live.

After all, the fundamental basis for anxiety is wired into our very nature as humans. It is there in the first place as the famous 'fight or flight' reaction you learned about in high school biology, which is designed to get the body revved up and the attention hyper-focused on a threat, so that our ancestors could escape things like saber tooth tigers. While there is a definite shortage of saber tooth tigers these days, the reaction is still important to our survival. It is what made possible some of the extraordinary feats of strength and courage that were displayed at the World Trade Center in 2001, or at the collapse of the 35W bridge.

But frankly, such occasions don't come along all that often, and we still have the driving physiology of fight or flight, which has now been hooked into our day to day lives in powerful ways. We fret for what may occur tomorrow, regardless of probability. Or as Mark Twain once said, "There have been many terrible events in my life, most of which never happened."

Nor is this just an individual experience. We live in a culture in which almost all of us are pushed beyond tolerable limits on a routine basis. It is demanded that we work, strive and produce at levels that are not humanly sustainable. We are told that we need to multi-task, when in reality the human brain is not actually capable of doing such a thing. We try to meet these expectations and far too often collapse under the stress of the attempt.

We are not evolved as a species to live at this pace. We're evolved to be farmers living in the steady rhythms of daylight and dark, of seasons coming and going, not meant to be cogs in a speeding machine. The result is what Luke Bouman describes as, "...the descent of our whole society into the bondage of chronic anxiety."

The basis of this prison in which we are trying to survive is the psychology of scarcity and self-sufficiency. There is not enough to go around; not enough wealth, not enough health care, not enough jobs, not enough corporate profit. If other people get a little more, I will get less. And I have to protect myself against the whole range of possible catastrophes that could threaten my well-being. I have to store up for tomorrow, prepare myself to defend against the demands of those others who might want what I have.

This is the fundamental psychology of Western culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, created by the constant bombardment of advertising and promotion which have very successfully turned our most fantastic and transient wants into overwhelming needs. I heard a story on NPR this week about designer sneakers which sell for thousands of dollars. They are intentionally created in limited numbers, and so people scramble to buy them. One man said that if he could get his hands on a pair of a certain kind he would buy them, even if they weren't a size he could wear. He would put them on a display shelf and HAVE them.

This is where we live, absorbed and preoccupied by gotta-haves, and what-ifs and might-have beens. And Jesus says that we cannot live both here and in the Kingdom of Heaven. When he says that we 'cannot serve God and wealth,' he simply makes the very accurate observation that we are unable to split our life focus between two fundamentally different ways of being. As Christians we want to find the path into God's Kingdom. But we too often try to do that on a kind of part-time basis, dividing our real concern between God's love and the perceived need to secure our own wellbeing.

Jesus is trying to teach us to see a deeper reality. Don't just give the world a hurried, passing glance. Look, really look, at God's other creatures, the birds of the air, the flowers in the field. It's not that they don't do any work. Birds work diligently to find the food they need. But they find today's food today, and tomorrow's food will be there tomorrow. Those lilies are working too, turning toward the sun, pulling up water and nutrients from the soil for today's glorious display of color, even though their very lives end tomorrow.

Jesus opposes the psychology of scarcity with the theology of abundance: It is in the nature of God's creation that all beings are fed and cared for by the creator's hand – a kind of maternal care for God's birds, God's flowers ....and God's people as well. We are called, as Walter Breuggeman puts it, to place our lives in the hands of "the creative generosity of God instead of our culture of

anxious, delusional self-sufficiency.” The theology of abundance teaches that there is plenty to go around if we let go of our anxious greed.

But, we ask, what of the very real bad things that do threaten us? There is hunger in the world, and disasters, and often deadly competition for resources. We need to remember to whom Jesus was originally preaching this sermon. His listeners were the peasants of Palestine who had to struggle just to scratch a bare living from their small, rocky fields. There certainly could be droughts or destroying insects or wealthy landlords confiscating a majority of what they could produce. Jesus knew on what a delicate edge of survival they were balanced.

He was not suggesting that they kick back and do no work to provide for themselves and their families. Rather he was teaching them to do their work in trust that God loves them and will never abandon them in whatever hardship comes. There is no amount of storing up that can make us safe from calamity. But God’s abundant love will accompany us in all things, if we will only live in trust of this reality, and not turn our backs on it for the sake of imaginary security.

This is the promise in the teachings of the prophet Isaiah in this morning’s lesson, words which were set to music by The Reverend Cary Landry:

I will never forget you my people. I have carved you on the palms of my hands. I will never forget you, I will not leave you orphaned, I will never forget my own.

Can a mother forget her baby, or a woman the child within her womb? Yet even if these forget, even if these forget, I will never forget my own.

Our true safety lies in this: that we will never be forgotten by God, not abandoned, not orphaned.

God’s abundance is the very wellspring of creation, and we are invited to rest in that reality. When we realign our vision, make our attention single-minded rather than split into a thousand anxious pieces, then our response can be a light in a desperate and dying world. Out of our very real excess, the hungry can be fed, the naked can be clothed, the homeless can receive shelter. When we turn away from constantly, anxiously accumulating, we can free time and energy to restore relationships that have too often been shortchanged in our obsessive striving. We can pay more attention to our kids, be more present to the lonely and the frightened. If we can let go of our needy pursuit of the next new thing, we can spare some of the world’s resources, and lift some of the burden of pollution.

When we live as though God's promise of abundance is real, we in turn become that abundance, poured out for those around us. Jesus invites us to turn away from our self-made slavery, to enter into God's generous freedom, the abundant love for us that can never be taken away. Wouldn't it be wonderful to live in that gracious space?

Addendum:

I stated at half-time of the service on Sunday that if people want to consider a concrete way of looking at the issues in this sermon, they might consider The Compact. This is a movement that originated with a small group of friends in San Francisco a couple years ago. While they had no intention of starting a movement, rather large numbers of people have followed their lead.

The premise of The Compact (you can, of course, Google it) is to commit for 1 year to buy nothing new other than:

Food

Underwear

Medicine/health needs

Participants agree to buy used, to barter or trade for other things they might need/want.

As of June 1 I will be starting The Compact. While I, too, had no particular intention of starting a movement, a couple people have been in touch with me since the sermon and wondered if a group in the church is going to pursue this.

SO

If there's anyone else who would like to give this a shot, and would like to have a kind of support group for it through St. John's, let me know.