

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany 2011

We have been listening to the Sermon on the Mount for much of Epiphany. Today all of the readings call us to let go of our anxiety. The theme of life in America at least since the beginning of the recession in 2008 is anxiety. Will there still be another recession. It seems that only the institutions that were “bailed out,” were the large banks and investment firms of Wall Street, the auto companies, and the insurance giants. Main Street was left to pick up the pieces. The ripple effect has now hit developing countries as well. What is happening in the Middle East and North Africa is in part a result of the anxieties of an uncertain world of economics, population growth, scarce resources, and yes, Facebook and twitter. Perhaps I don’t Twitter because even the word makes me anxious. So, here we are in a world full of anxiety as the following cartoon from *The New Yorker* reminds us: *It pictures a man sitting in his living room with a look of panic on his face. He's dropped his book and his hair stands on end. He's yanked his legs off the floor and onto the chair, where he clutches them in a fetal position. There's a bomb on the floor that someone has tossed through his window. Shattered glass litters the floor as the fuse burns down. In the punch line, he confesses to his wife: "It's my fault — I wasn't worrying enough."*

Yet in the Gospel for today Jesus tells us five times not to worry. Don't worry about your life. Worry won't get you anywhere. It won't change the past, the present, or the future. Why worry about your food, drink, and clothing? Stop worrying. As Dan Clendinen writes about this text: *Don't live like a Roman tax collector or the pagan Gentiles, says Jesus, who "run after all these things." Instead of hoarding money, give it away. Instead of obsessing about yourself, care for others. Beyond your prudent planning for the cares of life, abandon yourself to a God who is both infinitely powerful and intimately personal.*

Live like what you believe is true, which in fact it is, whether you believe it or not — that God is like a generous father who knows what you need, and a nursing mother for whom it's impossible to forget her baby at her breast (Isaiah 49:15). Don't fret about the future but enjoy the present moment. And consider the psalmist for this week: "I have quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother" (131:2).

Live like what you believe is true, which in fact it is, whether you believe it or not — that God is like a generous father who knows what you need, and a nursing mother for whom it's impossible to forget her baby at her breast as the prophet in Isaiah says. Don't fret about the future but enjoy the present moment. And consider the psalmist for this week: "I have quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother" (131:2).

As the prophet and the psalmists tell us, the Gospel also asks us to redirect our vision and our lives in much the same way that the lives of the first hearers needed to be redirected. It beckons us to turn away from the worry that comes with a life bombarded with advertisements that who we are and what we have is not good enough or we don't have enough. We are urged to believe that our value comes from our ability to try harder and hoard more, instead of building a trust in God that allows us to start from a place of "enough" and cast our gaze outward to the world as we share knowing that we are loved as who we are and not what we build up for ourselves. Our treasure comes through a life of generous love, Kate Huey ask--do our congregations practice the art of generous love? *Do we find ourselves worried so much about tomorrow, that we miss the life-giving and trustworthy activity of God today? How many of our congregations have become fretful about what we might lose if we took our gaze away from what we have to what God is calling us to? Might we find both new life in God and a new appreciation for our gifts?*

The mention of food, water, and clothing leads to another interesting parallel. While these things are listed as items we have, need, or will be given by the God who loves and cares for us, Jason Byassee notes that they are also "precisely those things that will determine our place in the judgment. 'I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink...' 'I was naked and you clothed me'" Jesus' instruction shows how discipleship has at its heart a sense of abundance in the world that, when discovered, sets people free to bring life to others. As long as we worry, we are enslaved to what we have and have put our trust in things that will in the end leave us disappointed. If we keep in mind that the entrance to the eternal life of which Matthew writes is reliant upon our ability to exercise justice by the exercise of generous love, how would we change our lives?

Nowhere does Matthew indicate that being a disciple would lead to a trouble-free life and any attempt to hear the "do not worry" exhortation as a promise of prosperity, and mental ease would easily be stopped in its tracks by this closing verse. Kate Huey reminds us that *if the passage is about shifting our center to God so that worry does not overwhelms us, it is precisely because the day has troubles that we need to hear this good news! Worry tends to project outward into all the "what if's" of life and remove us from the godly now, where we can know joy and gratitude if we can but trust in the Creator of all, who is also the God of the Moment. If we treasure this day, our hearts will lodge here also in wonder, in trust, in joy. Freed from worry we will be able to meet today's troubles with the humble confidence that the God who holds tomorrow also holds today.*