

## Epiphany 8

## Anxiety or Abundance?

Matt. 6:24-34

*A sermon preached at St. Paul's Episcopal Church by the Rev. Richard C. Israel, Associate Rector on February 27, 2011.*

I don't know if you, like me, found yourself stirring uncomfortably as you heard Jesus' words in the Gospel reading, "Do not worry about your life." Don't worry! You've got to be kidding, right! To say, "Don't worry" is like telling someone with a bad cold not to snuffle and sneeze so much—or telling someone who is lame to stop limping. It seems impossible.

Anxiety is a condition with which we are all acquainted isn't it? We face anxiety at every transition point of life. When we start at a new school, move to a new city, ask someone out on a date; when we are wheeled into surgery or wait for a loved one, when we know layoffs are coming, when we have to give up a home to move to a retirement community; when a loved one is in harm's way. If our personal experience isn't enough, we live in an incredibly anxious culture. Commercials on tv tell us we are not fulfilled unless we buy this product or that. The post office clerk asks if there is anything potentially dangerous in the packages we mail, the airport announcement tells us what the "threat level" is as determined by the Dept. of Homeland Security. Everywhere we turn there are visible reminders of just how much there is to worry about.

In early American revival meetings, there was a special seat down near the pulpit. It was called the "anxious seat". The anxious seat was a bench set aside for any person who was troubled, perplexed, worried, and in need of salvation. How many pews would we need if all of us who are anxious took advantage of such a seat?

Given the inevitability of stress and anxiety in our lives how are we to make sense of Jesus' command "not to worry"? Well, if we back up to the beginning of the reading, we notice that today's passage doesn't start with worry at all. It starts with Jesus' assertion that no one can serve two masters, God and money. If we try, we will end up loving one and hating the other.

It is important to point out that Jesus is not saying that money is evil or that people like us who have been blessed with great affluence in comparison to the great majority of people in the world are bad. What he is saying is that money or wealth makes a poor master. The greek word for "master" is "kyrios", which might better be translated "Lord". A lord is the one who demands and deserves your loyalty, allegiance, and worship. Money is a bad Lord because if we make money our god we fall prey to the larger worldview that crowns money lord in the first place: scarcity.

Once we believe that money is the way to satisfy our deepest needs, we suddenly discover that we never feel that we have enough money. Once we decide money grants security, then we are ushered immediately into a world of counting, tracking, and stock piling. No wonder we worry – in a world of scarcity, there is simply never enough. If we become preoccupied with measuring our self-worth by our stuff, by how good we look, by our ability to overcome the "blues" by putting down a credit card, we soon learn that we are always chasing some elusive belief that we still don't have enough and there is something more out there to buy that will make us complete. We also find ourselves becoming more and more worried about holding on to what we have and viewing others as threats to our wellbeing.

The alternative Jesus offers us in this passage is to enter into relationship with God, the infinite One, whose love for us and all creation is infinite as well. When we make God the source of our security, we enter into an economy of abundance. Love is not a zero sum game. I have two children whom I love very deeply. When Molly came along, I didn't have to divide my love that was given to her older brother Tim between the two of them. Miraculously, I found I had more love than before so there would be plenty to go around. Love, especially God's love for us, is like that. It cannot be counted, tracked or stockpiled. Placing our trust in God ushers us into the realm of abundance, a world of possibility and contentment, a world in which community and sharing and peace become possible.

The skeptic in me—and maybe in you—is full of doubts about whether this teaching can hold water. We live, after all, in a world that is ruled by scarcity, that worships money and the security it seems to promise. After all, our country spends more on military spending than the next 20 countries in the world combined. What impact can our decision to give our allegiance to God's abundance possibly make in a world that is so oriented to power and scarcity and fear? And, the skeptic in me asks, don't those birds of the air and the lilies of the field that God cares for come to naught, whether from predators or an incredibly brief life span?

Jesus is not promising us a gospel of prosperity and we need to be absolutely clear about that. This is why Jesus died on a cross because those in power were so invested in the world of scarcity that Jesus' life in which he demonstrated the power of love to build community and compassion was too threatening to them. Jesus doesn't promise us that if we trust in him we will be spared vulnerability, hardship, and death. Eugene Peterson's translation of this passage in *The Message* puts it in language that may be more understandable. "If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers...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*. 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."

What Jesus promises is that when we place our trust in God's reign of love, we will be connected to the One whose abundance has overcome this world's scarcity. In response to the crucifixion of Jesus, God does not seek revenge or look for how to balance the scales of injustice caused by sinful people. Instead God's response is resurrection, the ultimate act of abundance: creating something, once again, out of nothing, drawing light from darkness, giving new life to the dead.

This is the realm into which Jesus invites us: a realm characterized by abundance, generosity, and new life. Last week Alan invited us to sing and immerse ourselves in the message of the old Sunday School song, "Jesus loves me". And he reminded us that because of that love that companions us when we are vulnerable and afraid—even beyond the grave—we are free to love God and our neighbors. We no longer have to live with such a white-knuckled, tight fisted, anxious grip on our possessions and the belief that our identity and security comes from the length of our resumes or the fatness of our portfolios. We are free to live as Jesus did, reaching out to strangers, breaking bread with sinners, healing the sick and standing with those who are oppressed. We are free to join God in being generous, risking our lives to witness to the realm of God's abundant love that is stronger than fear.

I know we live in a world in which we are surrounded by countless images of scarcity and fear that give us reason to worry about the future. But I also know that each and every one of us who come here today have glimpsed images of God's love in our lives, have experienced joy and peace that is more

enduring than what our possessions can ever offer us. We come here often wondering if we can trust these experiences of God, needing to nurture this hope we have felt even fleetingly. We come here to participate in God's holy meal, a foretaste of the feast to come. We gather at this table where Christ's body once broken and blood poured out on the cross are signs of resurrection, of God's new life into which we have been incorporated by love. And we are sent from here to make love manifest in a world that needs to know that love is still possible, that God is at work caring for the world in a way that allows us to relax, breathe, count our blessings, and trust in God's providence.

Where have you seen God at work in the world? Where do you see courage, witness images of abundance, find examples of trust? Perhaps you see such images in pictures of your children or grandchildren; of someone doing his or her job with devotion and skill; in the courageous witness of a peaceful revolution in Egypt; in someone caring for a dying friend or serving at Loaves and Fishes; of people sharing their stories of faith at EFM or church school or youth group. Who knows? I'm sure, though, that if we start looking we will be amazed at the number of places we find abundance, courage and trust.

I urge you to look for images of God this week and share them with one another. If you are not sure if you will see God in your world I urge you to join in a Christian Formation class or a service group or an outreach ministry or a Greater Cleveland Congregations house meeting, and regular worship. If every week each one of us came here and told one other person where we witnessed God in the world, think about how we might grow in faith and find it easier to leave worry behind. Isn't that what you came hoping for today? It is what God promises for us all.