

SERMON, Proper 3A

Matthew 6:24-34

Preached Sunday, May 25, 2008 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

"Don't Worry, Be Happy."

Some years ago, this simple-minded aphorism seemed to pop up everywhere. It appeared on T-shirts, bumper stickers and even in a hit song by Bobby McFerrin. Remember the words?

"Ain't got no place to lay your head,
Somebody came and took your bed?

Don't worry, be happy.

The landlord says your rent is late,
He may have to litigate:

Don't worry, be happy.

In every life we have some trouble
But when you worry, you make it double

Don't worry, be happy."

Sounds pretty good, doesn't it? Most people I know — including me — would like to worry less and be happier, if they could just figure out how. And there's the rub: how do we get to the point of worrying less and being happier?

In the Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus offers divine wisdom on this very subject. As usual, it's not as simple-minded as the slogan from the early 1990s. But the end goal is clear. In these 10 verses, Jesus says "Do not worry" a total of three times. On the other hand, he says nothing about happiness here or anywhere else in the New Testament — which may tell us how important Jesus considered it. But he does say quite a bit about contentment:

"Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, ... will he not much more clothe you — you of little faith?" (vv. 27-30).

Jesus says that God will provide our basic human necessities — what we need to eat, drink and wear. When we strive for these things in an anxious way — when we build bigger barns to store up more than we need — worry begins to replace contentment.

"Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things," says Jesus. "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (vv. 32b-33). Or, as the King James translation so beautifully puts it, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and its righteousness. And all these things shall be added unto you."

Now, if we're being honest, we have to confess that this all sounds a bit crazy, doesn't it? At least it sounds counter-intuitive! Jesus counsels us not to worry about making our shopping lists, reviewing our stock portfolios, checking our insurance coverage or buying a security system to protect ourselves and our possessions. Instead, he wants us to focus first and foremost on making the kingdom of God a reality on earth. Instead of a grocery list for ourselves, make a list of food to bring next month for the pantry at the Sharing House. Review how we can help create a home for those displaced children and families in Durgapur, India. Work to secure the well-being of the poor in our community and elsewhere in the world. And, Jesus says, our basic human necessities will also be provided along the way.

When I stop and think about it, though, this may not be as crazy as it sounds. Once, I had the job of putting food from our cupboards at home into a paper bag to bring to St. Philip's for delivery to the Sharing House. When I reached into the back of our cabinet, I realized that we could have survived for weeks with all the canned food we had! In the process, I discovered some canned tuna which must have been sitting around for quite awhile. It had been a long time since we'd made any tuna salad, which I love. So I whipped up a batch for lunch that day, and still had cans left over to give to the needy. What if we as a nation worked to secure the human needs of the least of these here and elsewhere? Over the long run, I bet that we'd increase our own safety and security as well.

Seek ye first the Kingdom! says Jesus.

The challenge of living this way is that we're part of a culture that values an ever-expanding and ever-richer lifestyle. And the problem is that it creates the illusion of scarcity. If you want to live in a bigger house or drive a fancier car, it's going to cost you. Which means you're going to need more income. Which means you'll have to work harder or get luckier on Wall Street. Which will leave you less time to consider how much God has already blessed you — and the beauty of those lilies of the field. Every time we re-adjust our standard of "the good life," it makes us feel as if we have less right now. And yet, we live in the richest nation in the history of the world. In America, we don't lack the capacity to meet any human need — except in our unwillingness to share what we have with those who truly don't have enough.

In the faith community, we need to declare again and again that there is abundance in the economy of God's Kingdom. And as servants of the Kingdom, we need to stop buying into the scarcity mind-set — especially right now, at the start of an economic down-turn. We need to reject the lie which claims there's never enough to go around; that we always need to grab more for ourselves. What Jesus is trying to tell us is that there is enough. Believe it or not, right now — without acquiring any more possessions — what we have is ENOUGH! And maybe we'd worry less and be more grateful if we started living as if we actually believed these words of Christ. It's not "Don't worry, be happy." It's "Seek the kingdom and try to be content with what God has already given us." And along the way, we may just find that our anxiety decreases and our joy increases.

I have a renewed conviction about this because of something that happened to me. Last year, I applied for a grant to fund the sabbatical of my dreams. The application was extensive, asking for detailed travel plans, reading lists, and budgets. In an essay, I carefully explained how I dreamt of a sabbatical which combined prayer, study and a special family trip. The bishop wrote me a glowing recommendation letter. I thought I had as good a chance as anyone, if not better. But when it came time to hear back from the foundation, I received a thin envelope containing a single piece of paper. The letter inside explained that only 1 out of 10 applicants had been successful, and I was not among them. For some odd reason, I wasn't upset. "Oh well," I thought, "if God wants me to have a sabbatical, something will work out." That "something" came in two forms. The first was one of several life insurance policies that my father had had in his name. But this was one my mother didn't know about. After Dad died last November, Mom received a check in the mail unexpectedly. So she decided to share it with me and my two siblings. Next came the generous gifts to my sabbatical fund that so many of you made in honor of my 10th anniversary as your Rector. When I counted it all up, it was just enough to pay for the sabbatical I had been dreaming about — the sabbatical which starts six days from now.

When we seek and work for the Kingdom, "all these things" tend to fall into place, in ways we cannot imagine. After 15 years of ordained ministry, I need a time of sabbath rest and renewal. But I'm beginning to see that just as God looks after the birds of the air and the flowers in the field, God cares even more about us "of little faith." God seems to be saying that it's our job to worry about today, but it's His job to worry about tomorrow. We can't predict the future, but Jesus is Lord of yesterday, today and tomorrow. The more that we can trust in this, the less we will have to worry about.

Last Sunday, during the sermon time, we heard the story of Creation. Jill Stewart told the story using our wonderful Sunday School curriculum called "Godly Play." If you were here, you'll remember that seven cards were displayed during the course of the story. The first six had striking designs to illustrate what happened in the first six days. But then, a seventh card was held up. And it looked like this [*HOLD UP BLANK CARD*]. "There is nothing there, on the seventh day," says the story. That's because it represents a day of rest — for God, but for us as well. I have to confess that I find it a little intimidating to think of the days ahead during my sabbatical, when some will only be a blank slate. For 40 years, from the time I went off to Kindergarten, most of my days have been scheduled and filled with some kind of activity or other. I'm not very good at lying fallow. But I know that this is what my soul needs. I guess God will help me out this time, too.

"Don't worry"? Yes, says Jesus; Don't worry. Don't be anxious about what you truly need, because God will provide. "Be happy"? Not quite, says Jesus. But do try to be content with the blessings God has given you. Focus on the challenges and cares of today, but leave tomorrow in God's hand.

Above all, says the Lord, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God."

And all shall be well.