

8<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY/CYCLE A  
February 27, 2011  
Spirit in the Hills, Spicewood  
Text: Mt.6:24-34

DO NOT WORRY. REALLY?

"Do not worry," said Jesus. "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or what you will wear." Yeah, right!

Try quoting that to a teacher or staff member about to lose his or her job in one of our Texas school districts because of budget cutbacks.

Try quoting that to a woman who's just been diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

Try quoting that to someone who's been out of work for an extended period of time, who's been working diligently but unsuccessfully at finding new employment, and whose unemployment benefits are about to run out.

"Don't worry...look at the birds of the air...consider the lilies of the field..." And don't worry.

Try telling that to a single mother with a couple of young children, who has no health insurance, who works one or two jobs but still makes ends meet only because of various assistance programs—all of which are about to be eliminated or drastically cut back by federal and state governments.

Try telling that to the elderly, infirm, disabled, poverty level residents of a nursing home which may need to close if Medicaid funding dries up.

The examples could go on. But you get the jist.

Anyone here today who's never worried about something related to your health, your job, your income, how you're going to provide for your kids, how you're going to find health insurance, what an uncertain future holds for you, or anything else? Anyone?

My mom was a great worrier. So was my Grandpa Karli, of whom my dad once said, "When Pa doesn't have something to worry about, he worries about the fact that doesn't have something to worry about—because he must have missed something!". I think that growing up in the presence of two established worriers is at least partly responsible for my not being a great worrier—but I'm not immune from it either. Few, if any, are. #

So what's Jesus getting at here? This is one of the most lyrical, poetic, comforting passages in the four gospels. But when you set it up against the realities of living life in an all too often uncertain and difficult world, then a simplistic understanding of what Jesus says here becomes difficult. "Don't worry, be happy," doesn't make it. Indeed, it's necessary to dig deeper and listen more carefully for what Jesus is saying. #

First of all, Jesus is not saying, "Trust God, and everything you need in life will be handed to you." We know that's not true. And Jesus knew it wasn't true. Neither is Jesus saying, "Trust God enough and everything you need in life will be handed to you," as if having a high enough volume of faith and trust will make it possible to sit back and have God magically provide for your needs for the rest of your life. No.

Those birds of the air and lilies of the field Jesus talks about? The ones God provides for? Well, those birds work at meeting their needs. They have to go and search for the food God provides, and I have yet to see God up in the tree limbs building nests for them. And those lilies in the field? They're gonners if the soil is bad, if the rains don't come, if the sun bakes them, or the cold freezes them. They are at the mercy of the elements—and there's not a darn thing they can do about them—and sometimes they lose. So, Jesus is not saying to us, "Don't worry, because God's going to hand you everything you need and God will miraculously solve every problem and take care of everything that confronts you." No. #

The framers of our lectionary have wisely, correctly, and thankfully included verse 24 of Matthew 6 as the prelude to the main body of today's reading—because it sets the stage for what Jesus says about the birds and the lilies (and us), and points

us in the direction of understanding what Jesus is really saying.

"No one can serve two masters;..." Jesus says. "You cannot serve God and wealth (v.24). Therefore I tell you, do not worry...(v.25)."

Older translations have the word "mammon" where the New Revised Standard Version has "wealth." "Mammon" is a Greek word that means "money" or "property," but could be understood as referring more broadly to material things in general, even material necessities.

All of which makes it pretty clear that what Jesus is speaking about here is not meeting the basic needs of one's life, but about what stands at the center, as the foundation, of one's life. "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these [mammon] things will be given to you as well" (v.33), Jesus declares following his words about the birds and the lillies. Not "given" as in "handed to you on a plater", but as in "provided so that you have access to them."

Jesus is speaking about centering our lives in God, and in the things of God; and about trusting in God's love, mercy, and grace above all else--rather than centering our lives and our ultimate trust in the material things, even the material necessities, of this life. And further, Jesus is saying that if we place our trust first in God, then come what may, whatever

worries or anxieties in life may assail us (as they assuredly will), we can still stand solid on the foundation of God's love and care for us, for with regard to that there is no reason ever to be worried or anxious. Build your life on God, and the grace of God, Jesus is saying, and there is no need to worry or be anxious about life's center, life's foundation. #

My dad was a farmer in Southeastern South Dakota—a good farmer, a smart farmer. Like me, he was not much of a worrier; probably also, in part, because he lived in close proximity to the same two worriers as me (his dad and his wife, my mother). But it went beyond that, I know. Dad also had a deep and abiding faith which stood at the center of his life—and I'm convinced that foundation provided him with a strength that carried him through all the vagaries of making a living as a farmer: enough rainfall but not too much and at the right time, late spring frosts and early fall frosts which can kill a crop at the front end or the back end, hailstorms and insects—all those things and more that can make a farmer's life full of worry and anxiety.

Dad was also a singer, a tenor. And he did a lot of solo work at church and in other settings. One of his favorite songs to sing, because (I realize now) it expressed his faith, was based on today's gospel reading. You may know it: "His Eye is on the Sparrow." That song's lyrics perfectly declare what Jesus is speaking about in this text: having a solid foundation, a

constant source of comfort and strength, in God's love in Christ, regardless of what life throws at you. Civilla D. Martin's lyrics say:

Why should I feel discouraged, why should the shadows come,  
Why should my heart be lonely, and long for heaven and home,

When Jesus is my portion? My constant friend is He:

His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me... #

"Let not your heart be troubled," His tender word I hear,

And resting on His goodness, I lose my doubts and fears;

Though by the path He leadeth, but one step I may see;

His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me... #

Whenever I am tempted, whenever clouds arise,

When songs give place to sighing, when hope within me dies,

I draw the closer to Him, from care He sets me free;

His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me;

His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me. #

Refrain: I sing because I'm happy,

I sing because I'm free,

For his eye is on the sparrow,

And I know He watches me. #

There are and will be justifiable worries and anxieties in our lives. But when the center of life is strong and the foundation solid, free from worry and anxiety through God's love

for us in Jesus Christ, then we are free to deal with whatever anxieties and worries the rest of life may throw at us. AMEN.

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