

Matthew 6:25-33

The call came at supper. Ronnie, a close friend of my family, close enough that we teased him about being annexed as a brother, was on the phone. He had been to the doctor and they found a tumor on one kidney. The doctors told him not to worry. It was completely encapsulated. The doctors were pretty sure it was cancer but since he had two kidneys, and they caught it early, Ronnie should not feel anxious in the least. At the time he was 44 with a wife and teen son.

Today in the gospel reading Jesus, right from the first sentence, tells his disciples and us not to worry, not to be anxious. “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.”

Jesus clearly had never received news from a doctor that the test for cancer was positive. Ronnie’s family, my family, Ronnie, his wife and his son as well as Ronnie’s friends began storming the gates of heaven. Worry? We weren’t worrying. It was all in God’s hands. God would take care of this and make it right.

Some of us even sought refuge in this very gospel passage from Matthew. Look at the birds of the air. Consider the lilies of the field. God takes care of them. How much more important are you? WAY more important. Ronnie was WAY more important than a bird or flower. Ronnie would be fine. We believed really hard. We prayed really hard. Surely, God would honor that.

Anxiety comes in many forms. Most change creates anxiety. It can come with a diagnosis from the doctor. A pink slip from an employer. A car accident. Criticism from an important person. Discovering drugs in a teen’s bedroom. Empty nest. An examination that will determine a career path. A pregnancy. A divorce. Marriage. Conflict at home. A vacation. A promotion. Retirement. Tension in a relationship. Death of a loved one.

Look at the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns and yet God feeds them. From what I’ve seen, birds may not sow or reap but they sure work hard for their daily worm. They work hard gathering nest building materials. They work hard building their nests and scurrying about feeding their babies. Birds are also regularly found dead, hunted by cats, humans and in this day and age, automobile traffic. Jesus’ use of birds to tell us not to worry seems kind of jarring. Birds work hard and bad stuff still happens to them. Isn’t that something to worry about?

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin yet Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. The wild lilies in Palestine at the time of Jesus were beautiful indeed for about 10 days. Mostly they were brown and used along with wild grass to start fires in the ovens to bake bread. Another jarring image! Lilies may be beautiful but mostly life for a wild lily is NOT a particularly glamorous one.

And there's the rub. Sometimes, when we hear Jesus say, don't worry, don't be anxious, aren't we thinking that Jesus means God will take care of it? When Mom and Dad used to tell us that everything would be OK, we knew that meant Mom and Dad were going to take care of the problem. Whatever was wrong would be fixed. It's tempting to think of God as a Santa Claus, Wizard of Oz or vending machine. We put in our order and out comes the result we're looking for. When things fail to work out the way we want, we scramble to understand the reason. Sometimes we say, "It wasn't God's will." Some folks throw up their hands and proclaim, "God doesn't exist!" Some folks shake their heads and feel remorse because if they only prayed hard enough and believed fervently enough things would have worked out.

Jesus provides a different perspective all together. "Strive first for the kingdom of God, and his righteousness." Jesus' antidote for anxiety and worry is an open fist. When our fists are closed we are filled with fear that an event or person will take away whatever it is we're holding onto. We turn in on ourselves defending ourselves and our stuff against other people and the world. Jesus says that when we open our fists and look to God for meaning and purpose in our lives, we will be filled with hope rather than anxiety. We let go of the need for control of people and things in our lives.

Jesus says, "Strive first for the kingdom of God and all the things we need will be given to us as well." Tomorrow is Thanksgiving. When I told Bishop Edmiston I was asked to preach for the Thanksgiving service, his response made me pause. He told me to stick to the text and don't try to do anything cute with Pilgrims and Indians. It is a funny story but it occurs to me that there is nothing cute about the story of Thanksgiving just as there is nothing cute about what happens in our lives. Life in this world is not easy. Many of us have experienced sadness, upheaval, disappointment and betrayal. On Thanksgiving we remember those times as well as the times that made us smile. These past few weeks, I have heard many people remark on how blessed we are as a nation, community and church here at Trinity. Many of us realize we have much to be grateful for despite life's curve balls.

The call came while I was in the parking lot here at Trinity taking Kristen, my daughter, home from choir practice. Ronnie died on the operating table. We were all stunned. Hadn't we prayed? Hadn't we believed? Hadn't we shown God we had hope? Didn't we strive first for the kingdom? It sure felt like God hadn't heard a word! The thing we needed had not been added despite our best efforts.

Yet, Jesus asks "can any of you add a single hour to your span of life?" No. God is ultimately in charge. While we'll miss Ronnie this round of holiday parties, we have hope that he rests in God. Jesus rose from the dead and showed us that death is not the final answer. Life's sorrows and difficulties are not final either.

Jesus is telling us to lighten up. Worry and anxiety are not helpful. We are not blessed because we have the most toys, the biggest retirement account or the most fashionable wardrobe. We are not blessed because we strive first for the kingdom. We are not blessed because we believe the right things. That kind of thinking only leads to closed fists and fear of losing something. We are blessed because God is ultimately in charge. That's what we REALLY need. We are

blessed because God loves us.

Several weeks ago a Dad carried a little boy through the Communion line here in the nave. He was about 2 and leaned excitedly forward as I traced the sign of the cross on his forehead. When I finished, he raised his arm in a sign of victory and yelled, YES. May we also receive the loving grace of God with as much gratitude and enthusiasm as that young boy. When we TRULY know to our toes that God loves us, the world doesn't seem so scary. Happy Thanksgiving!

And May the blessings of Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with you now and always. Yes!. OK, let's try that again... I know it's late and I know we're Lutheran and Vicar what in the world are they teaching in that seminary anyway...but maybe just this once, we can forget we're stalwart Lutherans and receive God's blessing with a little more overt enthusiasm. Instead of a muted Amen, let's try a resounding YES! Just like that little boy. And for the more adventurous, you can try a little arm movement like this. Ready?

And May the blessings of Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with you now and always. YES!!!!

God loves YOU!! Go in peace.