

The Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A  
February 27, 2011 ~ Matthew 6:24-34  
Fr. Jim Cook

## “Don’t Worry! At Least, Not Too Much.”

I know that, on occasion, I worry too much about some things, and maybe so do you, but I don’t think I go overboard with it. I mean, I’m not chewing my nails to the quick, or pulling out clumps of hair (I don’t have much to spare!), and I’m not developing any ulcers. Actually, I tend to think that I’m fairly laid-back about most things. And maybe that’s why I’ve had difficulty with today’s gospel reading, because, in the heart of it, Jesus is telling us to not worry about our life — about what we eat, drink, or wear. Sure, when you’re omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, it’s easy to come up with that sort of stuff.

But think about the audience to whom Jesus is talking. He’s not talking to the wealthy folk of ancient Israel — there may be some in the crowd, to be sure, but his message was being delivered primarily to the 90% of the population who lived and worked at the subsistence level ... or worse. Doesn’t it seem just a bit cruel to say, to people who can barely eke out a living, “Don’t worry about your life”? Anyway, isn’t a certain amount of worry healthy, and just plain smart? Isn’t worrying about the welfare of your family, or your health, a necessary part of life? So, as a preacher, the challenge I faced last week was trying to figure out how can I proclaim a gospel message I’m not certain I even agree with.

As I thought about that problem this past week, I was also puzzling over the question of when had I last preached on this text, because it seemed so familiar. So, I did some research and I learned that this gospel reading is appointed for three specific Sundays: the eighth Sunday after the Epiphany, which is today, and which almost *never* happens (because it’s rare for Easter to be as late as it is this year); for Proper 3 during the Season of Pentecost, which *also* almost never happens (because it’s rare for Easter to be that early); and on Thanksgiving Day, which comes around, year after year, like clockwork.

So I got my trusty lectionary out and compared the texts and, sure enough, they were the same. Well, they were *almost* the same. Today’s gospel reading, when it’s read on Thanksgiving Day, actually omits the first and last verse of the passage we heard from Matthew’s gospel, and, let me tell you, those two verses change *everything*.

The first verse of today's gospel reading — *which isn't read on Thanksgiving* — has Jesus saying "you cannot serve God and wealth." And then we hear the familiar words of Jesus, telling us not to worry about our life; what we're going to eat, drink, or wear. And then, in the last verse of today's gospel reading — *which also isn't read on Thanksgiving* — Jesus says, "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

And as I was pondering the difference between what we heard today and what we hear each Thanksgiving, one of the lines in the Lord's Prayer popped into my head: "Give us this day our daily bread." And it hit me: In our gospel reading, Jesus isn't telling us that we should stop worrying about the things we need, and the things we need to do, *today*. Although he doesn't come right out and say it, I'll bet that he would agree that it's *today's* needs, and *today's* needs *alone*, that we should focus our attention. Tomorrow, we can worry about tomorrow's needs. And so forth.

That made more sense to me, because I can see how people can start running into trouble when they start worrying about, and anxiously striving to meet, tomorrow's needs, and the next day's needs, and next year's needs. And that can become a problem because, if that happens, God invariably gets edged out of our lives, because there's literally no time left in the day for (as Jesus put it) striving "for the kingdom of God and his righteousness."

But having said that, I don't want you to get the idea that today's gospel is an injunction against pension plans, retirement funds, or health insurance. I don't think Jesus is going there, because those things just make good sense. Rather, what I think Jesus is trying to hammer home is the importance of finding and maintaining a *balance* in our lives.

In fact, I think that Jesus is challenging us to dig down to the very roots of what we believe about ourselves, and asking us to think about what it is that defines our sense of self-worth; what it is that provides us with feelings of security; and what or who validates us as human beings.

In other words, is our value, our self-worth, our security, defined by the standards of the world, or do we discover our true selves in the context of a relationship with God? That's a *very* important question, because how we answer it can ultimately define our entire belief system, because how we answer that question will determine where we invest our energies, our time, and our resources. And how we answer that question will determine whether we view our neighbor as a fellow

pilgrim – which is probably what God wants – or as someone against whom we must compete to get all of the goods we think we may need.

In other words, what Jesus is saying is this: Remember not only *who* you are, but also *whose* you are. You are a child of the living God. You are loved. You are cherished. You are a reflection of God's love and grace, made in God's likeness, and you are *good*. The world doesn't know the real you, like I know the real you. It can't, because you don't belong to the world. You belong to me, always and forever, and it's only through me that you will ever come to know the real you. And when you discover who you really are, everything else will fall into place.

And then, that perfect love, with which God's holds us, will drive out our fear, and allow us to be at peace with ourselves and the world. And who you really are will no longer be defined by your circumstances, or by what you have, or by how much you've got. Instead, who you really are will define how you *respond* to your circumstances, and how you choose to live in the world.

"Therefore," Jesus says to us, "do not worry about your life." And now that I've had time to think about it, I'm beginning to think it's pretty *good* advice. Because, as I said at the outset, sometimes I worry too much. And I also know that, when I start worrying too much, I'm no good to anyone: I'm less patient than I need to be; I'm less tolerant; and, well, to be honest, I'm not much fun to be with.

However, I'm a lucky guy, because God has set me up with a wife who knows when I'm starting to worry too much – apparently I start sighing a lot when I'm worried. And when Peggy hears me sighing, she'll say to me things like "Let's go for a walk" or "Can we talk about it?" or "Let's go sit outside." She knows things like that distract me from my worries, they help me relax, and then I can really marvel at the beauty of the world. Then I can feel grateful for how fortunate I am. And then, I can remember who I really am, and, even more importantly, I can remember *whose* I am.

Maybe you're a lot like me; maybe you worry too much, and not just about today's concerns, but also about tomorrow's, and the next day's. If you're like that, even sometimes, then today's gospel is for you, because it reminds us that the compassion God feels for us, is like that of a nursing woman toward her infant; calling us into the arms of God where we receive faith, and are cared for. And those divine arms, and God's reign, is present even now, and they stand as an absolute promise for the future.

In the meantime, take to heart the advice of Jesus: really “look at the birds of the air,” and really “consider the lilies of the field.” And then remember that God values you more than any of them, and God *will* see to it that everything that needs to happen in your life — to you and for you — will take place.