

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for February 27, 2011
Lessons: Isaiah 49:8-16a and Matthew 6:24-34

BEYOND SURVIVING AND PROSPERING

Remember, because we all need to remember, that everything Jesus teaches presumes our relatedness to God. He offers no wisdom for living without God. True, people of kind heart and compassionate spirit find themselves attracted to his teachings even though they do not “believe in God,” they say, and their attraction to Jesus is not something to be scorned. For us to be faithful to him, we need to invite them to walk along with us, and we need to respect them and their personal integrity. But we ourselves cannot go very far down the road with Jesus before we realize that all his beliefs, hopes, and dreams depend upon God’s love for us and God’s longing (even, we might say, God’s obsession) with being truly *our God* to whose love and faithfulness we turn each day as some plants turn toward the sun. Jesus bases everything upon God’s love for this world and its people and God’s dedication to making human life responsive to that love. *We love because God first loved us.*¹ We care because God cares. We hope because God has promised.

Before looking more closely at Jesus’ teaching about anxiety, I need to distinguish clearly between what I am saying about all his teaching and what I am not saying about people drawn to it. As Christ’s church, we should not place barriers between people and him. When people who say they do not “believe in God” or are not sure they do are drawn to Jesus’ teachings, we must not block them from him because they have not assented to all our Christian doctrines about him and remain unwilling to do so. Salvation is not a transaction that can be settled and done, signed on the dotted line, and sealed. Salvation is a relationship not a transaction, and relationships are not settled and done; they are living things not contracts. We need to get rid of the transactional (contract) view of salvation and rediscover the relational view of it that is faithful to the Bible and to the living and honest way in which God has come to us in Jesus Christ.

Now, let’s talk about our anxieties and the nature of the freedom to which Jesus calls us. We are the anxious animal, the worrywart among God’s creatures, but we have reason. Not only can we human beings distinguish between *what is* and *what should be* so that we can be disappointed by the shortfall or outraged by the wrongdoing, but we can also think about *what might happen* in the future. We have the capacity to think in terms of “what if.” What if I lose my job? What if my health fails? What if my savings are depleted? What if someone in power takes away my pension? What if I flunk out of school or can’t get a job

or don't find someone to love and marry? So, we worry about ourselves and even more about people we love. We worry because we can imagine a variety of possible outcomes for our efforts, our plans, our attempts to secure our lives, and our lives themselves. We see possibilities for benefit or harm. Animals feel fear when they perceive danger, but they do not worry themselves sick about danger that might come weeks, months, or years away.

From all of this, we must conclude, I think, that worry is a natural human function that can benefit us when kept reasonable and not allowed to become a general condition of our lives and personalities. Some people, we know, seek worries and seem almost to require them. For such people, anxiety has become a disorder that robs them of peace and happiness today because of what might happen tomorrow. We know that people so plagued with anxiety need help, but we need to know also that telling them Jesus commands us not to worry about tomorrow does not help them. Telling a compulsive worrier to stop worrying is no help, and making the worry sound like a sin only adds guilt to the problem of anxiety. Guilt does not cure anxiety.

We all know that excessive worry spoils the joy of living and can make the worrier unpleasant company. Jesus, however, is telling us something more important and much more life-changing than just, "Don't worry." Yes, he is telling us that faith – trust in God's love and care – works against and relieves our anxieties. That's true, and countless people have found it helpful in times of distress. Some say they turn their worries over to God. Others speak of feeling God's presence and support with them as they go forward through the difficult time. I know very well what they mean because I have been there and know that God has brought us through times of stress and fear when anxiety could have taken over and where the actual outcomes could have been terrible. But Jesus is telling us something even more profoundly life-changing.

"No one can serve two masters." "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."² The truth is that Jesus did not come just to relieve our anxieties about our lives but to change the course of those lives by calling us to follow him in finding new reason for our being alive, for our existence in this world.

In our isolation as individuals or families, we easily and rather naturally believe that life is about security and then, going further, prosperity. "Live long and prosper."³ We wish each other health and prosperity. Sometimes we throw in happiness and peace of mind as well. The Bible sums up all these factors of well-being in a single word: *shalom*. And truly God wants shalom for us, but personal well-being is not our reason for being put here on this earth. Shalom is not the goal in itself. God sent neither the prophets nor Jesus to commend to us the good life or show us how to achieve it for ourselves and those we love. We are called to something greater.

The Farmworkers' Support Committee has a saying in Spanish sometimes printed on its communications: "Sin la justicia, no habrá la paz"-- *Without justice, there will be no peace*. The prophets proclaimed that very message, and Jesus takes it even further.

Isolation from each other is the very nature of sin. The early chapters of the Bible's first book, Genesis, show us the way rejection of God's love estranges people from each other, leading not just to loneliness but on to jealousy, rivalry, resentment, violence, hatred, and revenge. "Am I my brother's keeper?"⁴ As the splits widen, one group dehumanizes the other and so becomes itself less human. Humanity goes its separate ways, and shalom becomes a selfish thing of my peace at the expense of others, our prosperity in the service of which others must suffer deprivation. Today in our nation, the gap between rich and poor has widened and continues to widen at an alarming rate which I fear could make peace and perhaps even democracy perhaps unsustainable if we do not change course. We are seeing in the Middle East what happens when a few are ridiculously rich and powerful while the many live in poverty and desperation. We keep hearing that our schools are failing miserably and that our students are far behind those of other nations. Apparently, that's not accurate. If we look only at the children who are not poor, we find that ours are right up at the top.⁵ The problem – and there is a problem – is that a growing number of our children live in poverty, and many come from families and groups that have lived in poverty for generations, without hope, giving their labor for the prosperity of others. But because as a society we do not seem to want justice in our economy, we blame the schools.

Jesus calls us to "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness." We need to realize that "righteousness" is a relational term. We cannot have God for ourselves without seeing the rest of the world's people as God's children. We cannot have peace and well-being for ourselves without seeking justice for those denied peace and well-being. Taking God's love for us personally requires us to take God's love for the other person just as personally. Jesus is not only replacing worry with trust but also changing what we want in life and giving us very different goals. We live in a society that seeks convenience and entertainment. Jesus seeks compassion and service. People want prosperity; Jesus calls us to become rich in relation to God. We think trust in God is the servant of our own peace of mind; Jesus sees trust, rather, as commitment to God's will for the people of this earth. When we pray with him, "Thy will be done," we are not praying for our own well-being in isolation from others. We are looking with him beyond survival and prosperity. Time takes both of those away, but when we serve God's redemptive love for this world and its people, time cannot take our life or its meaning away from us, because then our treasure is with God and our hearts also. Amen.

Notes:

1. John 4:19.
2. Matthew 6:21, right before our lesson begins.
3. Mr. Spock of the television and movie series, Star Trek.
4. Cain to God in Genesis 4:9.
5. See Diane Ravitch, “Bridging Differences” (blog) article, “Another Look at PISA” here: http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/Bridging-Differences/2011/01/dear_deborah_i_have_been.html and also the National Association of Secondary School Principals, *The Principal Difference*, “It’s Poverty Not Stupid,” here: http://nasspblogs.org/principaldifference/2010/12/pisa_its_poverty_not_stupid_1.html