



“Smelling Salts”

Isaiah 49:8-16a and Matthew 6:24-34

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The Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany

We continue today with our look at the Sermon on the Mount. And like many parts of the Sermon on the Mount, today's passage contains some of Christ's most famous words.

Today's reading from Matthew opens with a warning...telling us that we cannot “serve two masters...wealth and God.”

But from then on...the tone shifts...and the passage ultimately ends on a wonderfully sympathetic...and even comforting note saying: “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.”

What Christ has to say to us this morning...it really is quite comforting. He's basically saying that we worry too much. And to help...he reminds us about the “Birds of the air”...and “the lilies of the field”...the message being that if God takes care of these...why not us also?

The tone here...it is quite different from what we've heard from Christ the past couple of weeks. Today, Christ's yoke seems easier.

Two weeks ago, Christ warned us about anger and lust...underscoring the seriousness of the message by saying that we should tear out our eyes if our eyes sin. Even though, of course, not a literal recommendation...it does intensify Christ's point.

And then last week...we were told to turn the other cheek and love our enemies...things that are so counter to our natural instincts.

But this week...it makes sense that Christ is easing up on us. This topic...our propensity to worry about our needs...God knows that this is the stuff of real life...and that this stuff can be painful to deal with.

Instead of pretty aggressively challenging us...as he did the past two weeks...here Jesus seems to be trying to comfort us...in part, by reminding us that our “heavenly Father knows” that we need all these things.

God knows that worry can overtake lives...and knows that so many of us have perfected the art of worrying.

Two bits of pop culture come to mind when I think about our need to worry.

First, Bobby McFerrin's Grammy Award winning song...from the 1980s...“Don't Worry, Be Happy.” This song was a national sensation. And it made a major comeback just a few years ago in the form of a singing fish.

I'm guessing many of you remember Big Mouth Billy Bass...the mounted dead fish...who suddenly comes alive singing...“Don't worry be happy...” The first time I saw it...I jumped back. Ridiculous yes...but it makes us laugh.

And the second is Alfred E. Neuman...he of Mad Magazine fame...and his signature phrase...“What me worry?” Looking about as goofy as humanly possible...Alfred peers out at us from the cover...as if he has no worries.

I think the brilliance in both of these...is that they make us laugh at ourselves...they make us laugh about something we all have to deal with. And undoubtedly this is very healthy.

But these real life worries...pardon the expression...they are “no laughing matter.” Today’s text mentions just a few things we get anxious about. But I’d guess that for most of us...the list is very long.

A few days ago...I noticed online...a piece with the following intriguing title: “Are you a worrier? 5 Tips to Turn Worry on Its Head.” Sceptically...I opened it up.

And it turned out to be solid advice for coping...very practical and logical.

For starters...the short article points out that worrying...in a sense...it gets a bum rap...that, to a degree, we need worry...that it can serve a constructive function. Worries can be like a built-in alarm system...that reminds us we really do need to get certain things done. It is a self-protective instinct.

This article counsels us to separate our worries into two categories:

First, unproductive worries...things that we can’t do anything about...like what others think of us;

Second, productive worries...things that we can do something about...when useful lists can be made.

The article also counsels that we need to accept that...to a degree...worries are always going to be there. And then finally it recommends occasional “vacations” from worry.

Good advice...very practical. And the author...Dr. Robert Leahy...it turns out he is a highly respected psychologist in the field of anxiety disorders...a leader in a field that changes lives.

As a side note...this may be obvious...but it’s still worth noting: for some...worry can be problematic enough that professional care can be helpful...and even at times, necessary.

But, any way you look at it...this worry business is indeed serious business...one that I think benefits...from humor...and from helpful tips like we hear in Dr. Leahy’s article...and sometimes even from professional help.

But in this morning’s text...I think we hear an **additional** perspective. And it’s a perspective that doesn’t in any way contradict what we hear in the field of psychology...or for that matter...in our 5 tips.

Actually, I’d argue that what we hear from Christ...it wonderfully compliments what we hear from Dr. Leahy and others.

On the one hand...psychology and related fields...they focus intently on our inner workings.

And on the other hand...these words from Christ...they start with who we are...and then they look beyond our inner workings...to a place called the Kingdom of God.

How one reacts to Christ’s words...my first instinct was to say it depends on what’s going on in our lives. But upon reflection, I’m not so sure it’s that simple. In fact, I think different audiences can react very similarly.

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Christ was speaking to his Disciples. And from what we know about the Disciples...they were part of what, in the day, was considered the

working class...people who were farmers...fisherman...craftsmen...even carpenters. This type of worker made up the vast majority of the population in Roman Palestine...something like 75%.

And what we also know is that this class of people struggled to scratch out a living. Theirs was a life of subsistence. They were one bad break away from dropping a rung on the social ladder...to the beggar's existence...disastrous in a society without any social safety net.

And so...the pressures on these working folks...they were intense. And Christ...being one of them...he understood this well. And so of course he was sympathetic.

But, I think his words also strike a familiar chord today. While our standard of living is light years ahead...it's remarkable how this text speaks so well to a modern audience.

And I'd say that's because...at least in terms of making a living...we worry about similar things. Just think about this recession...the hardships and changes of living standard that many have endured.

And modern day concerns about our own places in our communities...concerns about dropping down a rung...or more. While we do have a safety net...these are nevertheless real life concerns.

And so...the needs of both yesterday...and today...they are very real...and meeting them is a sober concern.

And God knows we have these pressures. Christ isn't telling us to stop the worries. He's too realistic for that. Instead he presents a framework for dealing with them.

Ironically, he begins by putting "God and wealth" on a similar level...telling us that we cannot serve both. I don't see any evidence in this passage that Christ is criticizing the quest for financial security.

But he is...however...clearly commenting on its place in our priority system...as he does in many places in the Gospels...with varying degrees of intensity.

But here...in today's text...it feels like he is trying to help us be more at ease...saying that God will provide. He doesn't say how...or under what circumstances. I suppose that is a mystery. But he is quite clear...God will somehow provide.

And yet...while this is comforting...this notion of not worrying so much...it still feels easier said than done.

And then comes Christ's punchline. After saying pagans obsess over these kinds of things...he finally comes to the point...and it's a simple point. He says we are supposed to "strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness."

Now just in case anyone is still feeling skeptical...we'd better dig into this statement a little deeper.

To me, the important phrase here is "strive first"...or in other translations "seek first." I think this phrase makes all the difference in the world.

Christ isn't saying that the solution is found in giving up our worries about financial stability. He's already acknowledged that God knows we need the things that we worry about.

No...I don't think Christ is trying to get rid of our worries. Instead I think he's trying to get us to transcend them.

It feels to me like Christ is saying something like this: before you go back to your worries...try a different approach for once. Try focusing on God...and God's priorities.

It feels like a recommendation to sort of reboot...this time first looking to God...then to our own lives.

And it also feels like a first step...a first step on the way toward the Kingdom of God. The first step is to try putting God at the top of our consciousness...bringing God more meaningfully into our lives.

It's kind of the opposite of that virtue of self-reliance...the one that is so ingrained in our American way of thinking.

No, instead, Christ is recommending **dependence** on God...and **giving our worries** over to God. And the irony is...that in so doing...we might find ourselves becoming more independent...more confident.

This really does sound ironic...but it is exactly what happened in my own life.

Now I know some of you have heard some of this before...but it would be difficult for me to give a sermon **on this text**...without relating how central these words have been to my life...how they changed me.

As a teenager...I had a meaningful relationship with God...an active prayer life. I needed God...and I knew it.

But for some reason...as I went out into the real world...I decided that I needed to do the exact opposite. I decided that I needed to become **more self-reliant**. Faith...nice idea...but now it's time to get serious.

And so I de-emphasized my relationship with God...I kind of froze God out to a large degree.

Years later...a thaw started. It started because deep down...I knew I was missing something.

The process of searching was crucial...but the biggest turning point was when I began to re-awaken to the importance of a relationship with God. **And the smelling salt...it was this exact passage.**

As I was re-engaging with the church...this church...and re-engaging with the Bible...I read these words. I remember it very clearly.

Now I didn't jump up on the spot...and start changing things. No...instead a seed was planted. It gradually occurred to me that...this self-reliance mentality...it wasn't the only way.

Christ's words marinated. It took a long time to even realize that it was these specific words...that had triggered what was happening.

I was in a career...that never really interested me that much. And I had been looking for ways to change. What happened was that I started to see the world a little bit differently.

The truth is that I have always been a worrier...and very cautious. But this alternative perspective...it started me to thinking...and the result was greater confidence to consider new paths....to consider leaving the safety...of the known path.

And this happened as kind of a baby step. I didn't quit my job. I instead began to more deeply explore my faith. And this in turn gave me more confidence to step out further...to try new things.

But the funny thing is that...what I was looking for...it was right in front of me all the time. It took me years as an adult to figure out what I knew as a kid: that by leaning on God...we become infinitely stronger...that leaning on God really can change lives...whether in leaps and bounds...or baby steps.

This is what Christ is teaching us here this morning. This is what Christ taught me.

And by the way... I still am a worrier...it just not as constraining a force. No, I don't think Christ is trying to change our stripes. **Instead I think Christ is trying to re-arrange them.**

And by the way... I continued to work at the same job for another 10+ years. I don't think Christ is telling us...what path to walk. **No, instead I think he is recommending with whom to walk it.**

This morning...Christ is seeking to boost our confidence...by telling us that...no matter where we are on this tricky and worrisome journey we call life...that God is there...always at our side.

This fresh perspective that Christ is talking about this morning...it can open us to new things...or it can help us to better appreciate...and see in a new light...our old things.

And when we open ourselves to new ways of thinking...unforeseen avenues can magically appear...avenues that can lead us to the most wonderful of places.

In fact, maybe one way to see this...is that Christ is laying before us...a low-risk proposition. It's as if he is inviting us...to try this new perspective...and see how it goes. Kind of like...what do we have to lose?

And so...my feeling here is that we have nothing to lose by trying what Christ is telling us this morning.

Actually...on second thought...strike that. Maybe we do have something to lose...our former ways of thinking.

Amen.