

8A Epiphany

February 27, 2011

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's, San Jose

Isaiah 49:8-16a God has inscribed us on the palms of his hands.

Psalms 131 I still my soul and make it quiet.

1 Corinthians 4:1-5 Servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries.

Matthew 6:24-34 Do not worry about your life.

Today's Gospel reading is another installment of the Sermon on the Mount. This talk is not to the crowds. Back at Matt 5:1 the Bible says that 'as the crowds were gathering, Jesus went up the mountainside with his disciples and sat down to teach them. This is what he taught them.' And so throughout this Epiphany season we have studied the attitudes and values God blesses; and about handling anger, lust, vows we make, and people who we count as our enemies. As Jesus continues to guide his closest followers, these men he is grooming to carry his message to the world after he is gone, he addresses the topic of their worrying about food and clothing.

These disciples had just shortly before this left their businesses, their homes, and their families. They would now be counting on strangers to feed them and give them places to stay. It certainly makes sense that he could see the worry on their faces, as they thought about the security they just had left, and the uncertainty that lay ahead.

Of course the teaching that Jesus offers about Worry applies to us as well as to his closest followers on that hillside 2000 years ago. Unbridled worry leads to being so consumed about our income and how much is in our wallet, that we avoid sharing any of our blessing of income with people who are starving or freezing to death. Untamed worry leads to our being consumed by fear, to the point that we can become paralyzed by it, and end up doing nothing but worry – which means that we are wasting our lives, not doing what God's plan is for our lives. Uncontrolled worry prevents us from developing a working trust in God, calling on Him and depending on Him to get us through whatever happens in our day.

I have never had to worry about having food to eat and clothes to wear. But I have certainly seen people lose their jobs, and I have worried about being laid off from my job. I have seen people become seriously ill, and worried about my own health keeping strong. I have had \$1 and \$5 bills in my wallet, but driven past homeless people at the exit to the shopping center, because I was afraid that I might need that money later.

About three weeks ago now, two women came to the church office during the week. They asked if I could help them with some cash. I told them that there was no cash here, and that I am very limited in what monies are available outside of the ministries we support for clothing, and through SMUM, and in the Sudan and Kenya. (I had practiced this story in my mind, and I thought it really sounded pretty convincing.) I had seen what had happened at other churches if the word gets out that the priest gives away cash. At another church in this area the priests did give cash. Soon when the church office staff arrived for work in the mornings, the sidewalk leading to the office door was lined with homeless people. The word had been spread, and they were all there to claim their cash prize. I worried about that happening here, and so I was ready with a reasonable story about why we have no cash here.

The two women said that they understood. They had come to ask because they had lost their jobs, and had been through a few very hard months. But one of them had gotten a new job that started in a week. The other had a job interview lined up, but didn't have any bus fare to get to the interview.

I remembered that in my desk drawer, there were some dollar bills floating around, I think since I came to St. Stephen's 8 ½ years ago. I started looking, and found the cash: there were two \$5 bills. I gave one to each of them. They both started thanking me, and thanking me, and thanking me. For one woman, this would be the bus fare to get her to the interview and get a job. For the other, this would help her get food until her first pay check. Both women went on thanking me and thanking St. Stephen's for the impact this \$5 would make. \$5! For the rest of my day, I felt good; more than good; I felt excited about that experience; **I felt like I had stepped into God's Kingdom that morning.** I was in it and part of it and seeing the effect of God's Kingdom on two women who **already seemed filled with it.**

Consider when worry or anxiety has been at the core of what motivated you to do or not do something. Consider experiences you have had of being generous of your time – money – attention or caring; that led to blessing someone else, and blessing you. WHY would we allow “worry” to rob us of time we could spend in God's Kingdom here and now?

Jesus was teaching his disciples not to allow worry to be so strong that we miss out on God's Kingdom happening all around us. You and I can experience living IN God's realm here and now, if we center our life on Him rather than on the things that can pull us down with worry.

That does NOT mean that some worry isn't warranted, to keep us safe. It does NOT mean that we shouldn't PLAN for tomorrow. God gave us brains to think about our goals; and to think about the steps it takes to achieve those goals; and the scheduling of those steps so we make progress toward our goals; and building up our trust in God's guidance through prayer and discerning the events in our life.

When you see worry winding out of control, remember the ‘Father Factor’ (v32); ‘Indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.’ Experiment with trusting God more and more in your life.

Remember the ‘Focus Factor’. If we put other things first, and then try to add God in later, our life is out of focus. Prioritize everything in your life based on God being at the center, and your life will be IN focus.

Remember the ‘Future Factor’. Don't borrow tomorrow's troubles. Live a day at a time. Worrying about what is not here yet can easily rob us of realizing the blessing God is offering us today.

If we remember the Father Factor, the Focus Factor, and the Future Factor, we can win the war over uncontrolled worry, and we can be contributing members of God's Kingdom here and now. Amen.