

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost ≡ Year A
Saint Paul's Episcopal Church
October 9, 2005

Do Not Worry About Anything

Lessons for the Day (*Proper 23*)

- ✧ Psalm 23
- ✧ Isaiah 25:1-9
- ✧ Philippians 4:4-13
- ✧ Matthew 22:1-14

Homily

I greet you in the name of **God our Creator, Christ our Brother**, and the **Holy Spirit** who sustains us and empowers us to love and to serve them both.

Amen.

I have a friend who has been threatening for years to write a book about the saints of our faith. He swears he is going to name this book, "**God's Greatest Hits -- Lessons from the Lives of the Saints.**"

I was put in the mind of my friend's book when I re-read Saint Paul's letter to the church at Philippi while preparing for today's worship service. Saint Paul himself wrote a fair number of hits, and we find many of them in the relatively brief epistle to the Philippians. I was especially struck by the stirring exhortation we read in today's epistle lesson.

It is to this exhortation I now want to turn -- especially to five little words buried in the sixth verse.

"Do not worry about anything," Paul says, ***"but in prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."***

"Do not worry about anything!"

What kind of counsel is that? And how -- even if we wanted to -- would we **ever** follow it?

I once heard an acid comment made about someone who appeared never to worry about anything: "*Anyone who is that happy is either stupid, or not paying attention!*" If we follow Paul's advice -- "**Do not worry about anything.**" - do we have to consign ourselves to the stupid or to the inattentive?

It seems to me that there are two ways to avoid worry.

The first way to avoid worry is to deny the reality of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We can "think happy thoughts." We can pretend that things are not as they are. "*Denial is more than a river in Egypt!*" -- or so they say. And we can choose to deny the reality of the challenges we face and live a life that is apparently without anxiety. But I'm not sure that is what Paul counsels here.

If denial doesn't work, or if the realist in us simply cannot stomach it, **we can choose the other route -- the holy route -- to deal with anxiety.** And it is to this route, at least in my judgment, which Saint Paul is pointing us.

Let's stop and think for a moment about Paul's life. He was imprisoned many times. He traveled hundreds of miles - establishing churches, and then watching as the churches strayed off into conflict, schism or heresy. His life was regularly in danger because he was a threat to those in power and in authority. And yet ***the entire letter to the Philippian Church echoes with the sound of Paul's deep joy.***

So how did Paul live a life of deep joy when clearly he had **plenty** to worry about? **And how might we do the same?**

If the **first route to a life without worry is denial**, the second route to a life without worry is the polar opposite -- **the second route to a life without worry is acknowledgement**.

We have heard Saint Paul's life story often enough to know it by heart. Earlier in Philippians -- in chapter three -- **Paul acknowledges who he is before God and the church**: a Hebrew born of Hebrews, a persecutor of the church and blameless under the law. And then Paul says an amazing thing:

"Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake (for Christ's sake) I have suffered the loss of all things . . . in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ."

Philippians 3:7-9b (NRSV)

And here, perhaps, is the secret to a life without worry: **we live a life without worry when we acknowledge -- and are grounded in -- this sustaining truth**: we are children of a loving God, redeemed by Christ and made in God's own image.

It is **acknowledgement** -- the telling of the whole truth before God -- **that begins to free us from anxiety**.

We have **made** and we have **heard some astounding acknowledgements** today as we have participated in the Baptismal liturgy and the deep joy of welcoming new members into our family of faith. These acknowledgements are the beginning of a life without anxiety:

- ✘ We acknowledge that we contend with forces greater than ourselves -- that's **telling the truth about our circumstances**.
- ✘ We acknowledge that we cannot do it alone -- that's **telling the truth about ourselves**.
- ✘ We acknowledge Christ as savior, which is **telling the truth about who Christ is, and about his role in the redemption of the world**.
- ✘ We acknowledge our desire to trust Christ and to follow him as Lord, which is **naming the only true response we can make to Christ's amazing love**.

Anxiety is born of worry about who we are:

- ✘ Are we **cute** enough?
- ✘ Are we **smart** enough?
- ✘ Are we **rich** enough?
- ✘ Are we **loved** enough?
- ✘ Are we, ourselves, **enough**?

Peace is found -- as Paul discovered -- **in acknowledgement of whose we are**: children of a loving God, made in God's own image, redeemed by Christ, and transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So, you say to yourself, **fine!** **To whom** do I make these grand acknowledgements, and **how do I do it?** And Paul gives us insight here, as well. Because the second portion of our verse says tell us:

"Do not worry about anything, but in prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

I **have a profound sense that** -- in my own life of faith -- **I vastly underestimate and underuse the discipline of prayer.** I often pray "grocery list" prayers -- quickly checking off the items I need to get through the week's menu of activities. And I'm not sure that is what Paul is talking about here.

Carroll Simcox has written a wonderful little book entitled *Prayer: The Divine Dialogue* -- and **it is to this type of prayer that I think Saint Paul calls us.**

Dialogue with God -- and true dialogue entails authentic listening, too -- **offers us the chance to know ourselves as enough.** To understand ourselves as made by a loving God, redeemed by a saving Christ, empowered by a transforming Spirit.

We **talk to God**, surely. And we also **listen to God.** We **sit before God.** We **wait for God.** Sometimes we **wait with God.** And in the sitting and the waiting and the talking -- and especially in the listening -- we come to realize that there is no need to worry. No need to be anxious.

Sometimes the poor and the marginalized learn this lesson more quickly than the rest of us. I think about the great spiritual songs of the slaves in the ante-bellum South. "He's got the whole world in His hands..." they sang.

And they **believed.** And it **diminished their anxiety.**

We are full of anxious striving because we forget the source of our strength:

1. **the creative God** who made us, knows us, loves us and wills only good for our lives,
2. **the loving Savior** who redeemed us and models for us a life of faithful obedience, and
3. **the empowering Spirit** who is the agent of our transformation, and who enables us to know and serve both God and Christ.

Do not worry about anything. Remember whose you are. Hang on to the source of your strength.

God's got the whole world in God's hands.

Now go forth from here to proclaim the good news of God's great love to a dark and hurting world!

Amen.