

Joel 2: 21-27  
I Timothy 2: 1-7  
Matthew 6: 24-33

“A Quiet and Peaceable Life”  
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*Here is a little song I wrote  
You might want to sing it note for note  
Don't worry be happy  
In every life we have some trouble  
When you worry you make it double  
Don't worry, be happy.....*

So sings Bobby McFerrin in a light-hearted adaptation a 60's poster message.

*One love, one heart  
Let's get together and feel all right  
Hear the children crying (One love)  
Hear the children crying (One heart)  
Sayin', "Give thanks and praise to the Lord and I will feel all right."  
Sayin', "Let's get together and feel all right."  
Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa*

So sang Bob Marley in the 1970's. And so sang the Parisians who gathered to mourn in La Place de la Republique last Saturday night, a week ago. Not a bouncy, light-hearted reggae beat, but a ragged, tear-choked song of hope and defiance.

“Do not worry,” says Jesus. “Pray for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions,” says the author of the first letter to Timothy. “God’s people will never again be put to shame,” says the prophet Joel. Sometimes what we read in the Bible is difficult to absorb. Don’t worry – as if it’s that simple! Would Jesus say this to someone on a dangerous journey to leave their war-torn or gang-infested country? Or to people who had seen a café attacked in a hip Parisian neighborhood? Or to people who are facing a Vermont winter without housing? Or to islanders whose very landscape, the ground beneath their feet, is threatened by climate change? Surely Jesus was not speaking to them.

And the author of that letter to Timothy: “pray for those in power, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.” How does that advice work out when those in power are murderous or corrupt or incompetent? Yes, sometimes our Scripture readings inspire skepticism more than confidence. But that doesn’t mean that I won’t wrestle with those readings and search for the word of God imbedded in them.

As I journey through Scripture, and especially as I read the Gospels, I am struck again with the reality that we are not offered healing or salvation as a personal gift. Instead we are called to live from the spirit of a tradition that calls us to honor and preserve the dignity and humanity of every person we might encounter – friend, stranger or enemy. We have been challenged to reconcile, to treat one another with respect, and to name our own worth as we stand tall even in the face of those

who would throw us on a trash heap. We are unable to avoid the connectedness of it all: the way our actions and attitudes affect those with whom we live.

The passage we heard from the Gospel of Matthew is embedded in the Sermon on the Mount. It is not a sermon really: it is a long series of teachings from Jesus, really a commentary on the laws of the Jewish tradition. When we read the whole “sermon” it becomes clear that Jesus was not speaking to us as individuals. This command to resist worry must be connected to the way we relate to one another. There are two clues that show this to be the case, and that show us how we can find true freedom from worry. What is the antidote to worry?

“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” The word used for ‘wealth’ here is *mammon* or *mammona* and refers to ‘that in which one puts one’s trust’, or to ‘treasure’ or ‘riches’. (Remember the words written on United States currency, “In God We Trust”, which might also read “This is the God in whom we trust”). “Therefore” says Jesus, “Do not worry about your life...” This is a huge insight. Money does not free us from worry. Treasure, no matter how much we may have, does not keep us safe, secure or content. So, if we are to be free from worry, it will require us to stop putting ultimate trust in our treasure.

Well, that takes us partway there. But what about all the other pressures and stresses and concerns and sorrows of life? The end of our reading today gives us some enigmatic, and often misunderstood words from Jesus: “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

“All these things.” Maybe we first have to understand what poverty is, what humans lack, before we can understand what the antidote to worry is. The theologian Paul Tillich characterized the most predominant modern anxiety as spiritual; in other words, we suffer from emptiness or meaninglessness. If Tillich is the diagnostician, then maybe the cure is offered by the Jesuit theologian and mystic Anthony de Mello, who said, “You sanctify whatever you are grateful for.” In other words, instead of brooding on our worries, change the perspective. Look elsewhere, beyond self-absorption. Cultivate a grateful heart.

True poverty is rooted in the spiritual anxiety Tillich names. It is not lack of money; it is lack of relationships, or broken relationships. I once heard someone suggest that each of us should try an experiment – a thought experiment. If you were dropped off in an unfamiliar city, with no money, no shelter and no food, how long do you think it would take you to find a place to sleep, a good meal and some funds to keep you going? When I did this exercise I realized that it would probably take me no longer than a few minutes to make sure that I would be OK. I have a number of resources: financial assets, networks and relationships and communication skills (not to mention white skin and a level of credibility that comes with my age) that will help me out if I find myself in trouble. This is what the poor lack. This is what the refugees lack. But, in the world Jesus preaches about, the Kingdom he described, no one is without such networks, and so no one would have any reason to worry.

This is why Jesus calls us to strive first for God’s Kingdom and God’s justice. ‘Righteousness’ and ‘justice’ were synonyms in the vocabulary of Jesus. Clearly the kind of righteousness Jesus is speaking about is not some legalistic avoidance of the “you shall nots”, but rather a commitment to the “you shalls” of God’s Kingdom: seeking a more fair, compassionate, peaceful and generous way in the world. The kind of life that is offered to us in this vision: a free life, a less anxious life, a life

of spiritual abundance is possible when we focus on joining others in striving for that Kingdom. It means embracing each other – and the stranger – taking responsibility for one another – and the stranger. It means celebrating **interdependence**, even in the face of tragedy, as did those in the Place de la Republique last Saturday. It means celebrating those connections, **especially** in the face of tragedy.

When I thought about all of our Scripture readings today, I realized that they were not written in times of security or plenty. The prophet Joel speaks to a people who were recovering from an ecological disaster and famine. The early Christian communities in the times of Matthew and Timothy were under constant threat from the very “kings and all who are in high positions” for whom they were told to pray. All of the first hearers and readers of the words we heard today had huge worries and anxieties, as well as all of the small and petty anxieties that plague us. The phrase “a quiet and peaceable life” seems almost laughable in this context.

So I return to my earlier question “What is the antidote to worry?” Maybe a song is not a bad starting place: a song sung together with people who need hope and comfort. Maybe - a recognition of the limitations of wealth is another. Maybe another is - a kind of striving, “a demanding common task which makes for community,” as George MacLeod would say. And maybe – no, not maybe, I am sure of this one – hearts that mediate in gratitude become places of compassion and joy. People, like you and me, who are conscious of the gifts we have received and who share that consciousness, become a powerful force for God’s kingdom of justice.

This week, my signature on all my e-mails has included a quote from the 14<sup>th</sup> century mystic, Meister Eckhart. It says, “If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough.” Meister Eckhart also wrote, “Every creature is a word of God.”

This Thanksgiving, I give thanks for a tradition that lifts up the value of each person as created in God’s image. I give thanks for all the ways that so many lead by serving, and all the ways that compassion for our brothers and sisters is expressed here, and elsewhere in churches and communities all over. I give thanks for people who sing when they recover from tragedy. I give thanks for the way that our common striving to be doers of the Word surrounds us and holds us up, as willing citizens of the justice Kingdom, the church. Amen.