

Proper 14 - 11 Pentecost – Year C – August 11, 2010 - Homily
Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40
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Fear is defined as an emotional response to a perceived threat. It has also been suggested that fear is one of our innate human emotions just as we also experience joy, sadness, or anger. Many of us harbor fears: fear of flying; fear of public speaking; fear of spiders, clowns, snakes; fear of death; fear of all kinds of things. Fear is to be distinguished from anxiety, which typically occurs without any external threat.

In tonight's Gospel reading Jesus says, "Do not be afraid." That phrase appears seventy times in the Bible. A similar phrase, "Do not fear" appears fifty-eight times in Scripture. Obviously, this is significant advice! The words "anxiety" and "anxious" also appear in the Scriptures. In first Peter (5:7) we read, "Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you." In our own lives, I think we all sense much more stress from insidious anxiousness than from naked fear. Realistically we are pretty cushioned and secure, and incredibly blessed in this country. We are not living directly in a war zone, most of us are not homeless or hungry, and we don't live in a major earthquake, tornado or hurricane zone either. Nor do we live in a big city, which might be under a greater threat of terrorism. By all accounts, our lives should be relatively peace-filled, quiet, and joyful. So what's up?

I was talking with someone this week, about the general level of anxiety all around us, and they said something worth sharing. They thought that our general anxiousness was tantamount to, and I quote, "a loss of confidence, and particularly a loss of confidence, because the future seems so uncertain." There are many uncertainties in life. Money is often an issue, especially when the economy is in the doldrums. Our health is always in the back of our minds. Worries about our families, can keep us awake at night. And for some of us there's the uneasy reality that if business continues to slump, we may end up unemployed. This is not about painting the world black, purple or even dark blue. We all flirt with anxiety from time to time; we all worry a little, despite God's good advice on the matter. Yet when we pray to God it is good to recall that the world God created and called good is still a good place in many, many ways. It is good to remember just how blessed we are each and every day of our lives, and especially for the gift of freedom in Christ.

In the reading from Luke's Gospel we hear some other important reminders. Fear and anxiety can be like a smoke screen, obscuring our view of God's truth, and choking the oxygen from our brains so that we can hardly think straight. Right up front, after we put aside our fear, and step around the wall of our anxieties, we hear that it is God's good pleasure to give us the kingdom. What might that mean? Considering the way Luke has developed this theme, the kingdom is not some future event. The kingdom is present to the world through the Body of Christ – you, me and all Jesus' followers. The kingdom is also present to the world in all the things that we do to share God's love today with God's help. In this reading, Jesus offers some general suggestions on the ways we can participate in building and extending God's kingdom. They are all like antidotes to the poison of anxiety and fearful living.

The first is generosity. As we saw with the parable of the foolish rich man a couple of weeks ago – the opposite of his selfish behavior and hoarding is generosity. Re-worded, Jesus suggests that in our generous giving we are investing in God's kingdom. There is even more good news, God provides us with the means to make these generous investments, and guarantees their security and efficacy as imperishable and eternal. Our generosity truly is in accord with God's will and truly

makes a difference in the lives of others.

I love the second example that Jesus shares. “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit.” Isn’t that great? Whatever thoughts might have flashed across your mind on what dressing for action looks like, we can take away some clear insights here. Certainly, in the minds of the first century disciples, they would have heard Jesus’ words as a reference to the Exodus story when the Israelites escaped from Egypt. That conjures images and Scriptural memories of having their loins girded and ready for anything. For Christians, what might be the equivalent of being dressed for action?

Accepting the gift of faith in Christ, and being clothed in righteousness perhaps? What about having our lamps lit? Maybe in this day and age that is more about being intentional in our faith, so that our hearts, minds, and spirits are focused on loving God and our neighbor, and lean towards prayer and discerning God’s will. It probably doesn’t mean that we keep the hall light on every night! It’s also easy for us to become distracted and lose our focus, especially if we’re feeling stressed and anxious. Staying grounded in the habits and disciplines of our faith goes a long way to helping us keep our eyes on God, our minds on the joy and hope of God in Christ, and our hearts on doing God’s will as we are blessed in our spiritual gifts. Isn’t that like being a burning lamp for Christ; a beacon of hope in a weary and worried world?

The last two antidotes to the poison of fear and anxiety are faithful hospitality and a spirit of humility. We speak of our ongoing transformation in the Holy Spirit as becoming more Christ-like. What an image we have here of Christ the servant, humbling Himself to wait at table in the heavenly banquet. It is a gift of hospitality to receive Christ into our hearts and to grow in His goodness, love and mercy. It is an eternal blessing that Christ, who has given us so much in His life, death and resurrection, continues to take great joy in serving us now, as well as in heaven. It is an ongoing blessing that we too are servants of Christ and ministers of the Word to the world. That ministry is inextricably bound with the gift of Christ-like humility. We give, we serve, we share without expecting anything in return. Let’s not forget that Christ’s way of life was politically and culturally radical. In a time when the system of patronage, honor, shame, and reciprocity for all gifts and deeds was firmly entrenched, what Jesus says and does goes against all cultural norms and expectations. Guess what? It still does. Because we are not beyond “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours,” thinking and “what’s in it for me” doing even today. Loving and giving without expectation of return means that we are most especially sharing God’s love with the poorest of the poor, and those who live on the margins of society with very limited resources.

The foundation of our faith and beliefs is Jesus, whom we know and love. Our security can never be based in the ups and downs of the economy, or any other earthly variable that is passing away. Our security lies in God’s steadfast love and unfailing mercy. Our own confidence is rooted in the sure and certain knowledge that God desires the very best for us, and that God wants to bless us. If we’re holding on to earthly things, including our anxious moments, our hands and hearts are not open and ready to receive God’s blessings. The invitation for us this week, is to come before the Lord with open hands to receive God’s good gifts, including healing, and the peace that passes all understanding. God’s promises are sure.

Amen.