

“Take a Deep Breath” – Mat 6:24-34 – Feb 27/11 – Epiphany 8

You might be surprised to discover that this reading from Matthew, as “familiar” as it is, rarely occurs in the lectionary (the suggested three-year cycle of scripture readings) and I’m sure isn’t picked much more often by preachers. It is one of those “troublesome” texts, seemingly simple and with a veritable collection of easily-quotable bumper-sticker message that can be plastered everywhere as a sage adage. “You cannot serve God and wealth.” “Consider the lilies of the field...” In order that you don’t leave here this morning covered with those bumper stickers, we need to sort through the text and see if there’s something more meaningful to take away.

Let’s start at the beginning, almost with the very first word. “Therefore”, Jesus leads into this particular piece of teaching and advice, and with that introduction we recognize he is wrapping up, providing a summary explanation for something he has already said. Let’s refresh our memories as to what he has already taught the crowds.

Matthew collects a whole truckload of Jesus’ teachings into what we now call the ‘Sermon on the Mount’, a setting in which Jesus says a lot about what it means to be called blessed, and what it takes to be faithful. Along with such affirmations as “Blessed are the peacemakers” Jesus included many instructions such as, “Beware of practicing your piety in front of others in order to be seen by them ... don’t be like the hypocrites who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and the street corners, but instead go into your room and shut the door and pray.” Continuing the theme of prayer, Jesus went on to tell them not to pray with heaped-up empty phrases like the Gentiles and to simplify their holy babble with the prayer he gave to them, the prayer we know and love and use as the Lord’s Prayer.

Jesus continued, “Do not store up for yourself treasures on earth, ... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven”, and then we come to his conclusion in today’s reading ... “therefore ... you cannot serve God and wealth.” As we hear this conclusion we naturally conclude it to be about the struggle between faith and wealth. Indeed, monastic orders and others of deep faith have used this passage to justify a life of poverty, relying on their needs being supplied by God acting through the charity of the faithful. But there’s much more to this particular instruction from Jesus than just a simple or simplistic struggle between faith and wealth – Jesus even concludes that with the right priorities one will lead to the other.

“Do not be anxious” Jesus also tells his listeners, and Matthew and Luke echo his words, giving us a clue that both the people gathered around Jesus and the people in the early church did worry, that indeed they shared with us an anxiety about the necessities of life. “How can we not be anxious?”, we also ask, echoing the same questions asked by people sitting on hillsides overlooking the Sea of Galilee, by people sitting in their homes in the city of Rome, and by people on the far borders of the Empire. People anxious that being known as Christians will cost them dearly; people guilty about having to spend their time and energy and money on feeding and clothing their family instead of participating in the church; people fraught with worry that they are losing the struggle between faith and wealth.

Those people of long ago needed to hear, as do we of today need to hear, that this message is not saying we have only an exclusive one-or-the-other choice in front of us, but instead that we need to find the right balance in faith, to remember what is important to God and in God’s kingdom.

Before we go on, we need to address another potential problem with this message, so again let’s go back a bit. Recall that in this part of Jesus’ teaching we are cautioned not to be like the Gentiles, focusing on food, drink, and fine clothes. If this was all we heard we might well come away confused, because we are the Gentiles. Does Jesus mean we are to struggle with the basics of who we are? Well, in a sense, yes he means exactly that, but it’s not because he was an anti-Gentile Jewish

zealot, as Jesus had plenty to say about the danger of behaving like a Jewish hypocrite as well. In his balanced attacks on both hyper-pious Jews and non-pious Gentiles alike, it seems fairly clear that Jesus was saying “don’t be like those at either end of the spectrum between over-religious and non-religious”. On the one hand Jesus says don’t be like those zealots who practice their religion with a focus of “look at me and how pious I am”, but who have lost the essence of faith, the call to honour God and to treat others well. And in almost the same breath Jesus says don’t be like those at the opposite end of the scale, abandoning all thought of God in favour of worldly pleasures.

I think we can imagine the polar opposite people in Jesus’ day of whom he spoke ... the ultra-orthodox Jew, the licentious Greek playboy. It doesn’t take much imagination to also recognize people today from both ends of the spectrum identified by Jesus. We still have plenty of people who exercise their faith primarily to be seen as faithful. Some of the specific symbols have changed, with dog-eared floppy bibles replacing little cubes bound to the forehead for example, but their thirst to be seen as perfectly righteous is every bit as all-consuming. At the same time there is no shortage of people who could be described as the new, improved version of the wine-and-dine Gentile, happily (or unhappily as is more often the case) enslaved to the gods of wealth and pleasure.

Jesus’ admonition is to avoid being identified as the kind of person found at either end of this spectrum, in order to avoid losing out on the rewards of God’s kingdom. And he even tells us how to do that, namely to “strive first for the kingdom of God and for his righteousness”, the old familiar “seek ye first...”. But what exactly does that mean? What do we look for? How can we strive for something we don’t understand and might not recognize when we see it? How can we have some assurance, how can we be ‘not anxious’ about our faith?

One possibility is to recognize that there is something common about the people found on both ends of the faith-wealth spectrum, and that is their focus on self. You’ve probably heard me talk about what I’m calling the “sin of a sense of entitlement”, that feeling that somehow one is “entitled” to fame, fortune, or even favour from God ... people from both ends of the faith-wealth spectrum seem subject to this failing. Jesus’ call for us to be in the middle instead of at either end of the spectrum calls us to turn our focus to somewhere other than ourselves. If not on ourselves, where then should our focus be? We’re only left with two options, on God, and on other people – starts to sound a bit like “seek first God’s kingdom and His righteousness”, doesn’t it? This begins to sound a lot like the other things Jesus had to say about how we should live out our faith, doesn’t it – loving God, loving others?

With this perspective now this direction from Jesus sounds less like a call to poverty, to nakedness, to a monastic existence as it sounds like a call to live our lives dividing our attention between God and other people, serving them as he has served us, confident in our faith that not only will God provide all that we need but that we will be rewarded with the gift of finding ourselves deep in the middle of his kingdom.

Nevertheless, we are still people with wants and needs, living in an uncertain world where real possibilities exist that we could find either wants or worse yet needs unfulfilled. We live in a world and a time when the relative calm and peace – uneasy and tense though it might have been at times – that we have experienced over the past fifty years seems to be disintegrating. Global financial meltdowns, revolutionary forces sweeping the middle east, piracy taking over large parts of the Indian Ocean, devastating earthquakes along the “ring of fire” on top of which we also sit – these are but some of the events swirling around us that cause us to worry, and worry we do.

In the midst of this worry we hear the voice of Jesus telling us not to worry about tomorrow, recognizing that today has enough worries already. From anyone else this would be like the advice from Libyan nutjob Muammar Gaddafi, calling from the parapets to the crowd to “dance, be happy!” However, from the One we acknowledge as Lord and Saviour, from the One who promised to have the

Father send the comforter, the counselor, the Holy Spirit this is not just a “don’t worry, be happy” kind of bumper-sticker advice. In a sense Jesus is giving his followers, and giving us, the same kind of advice that we would give to someone experiencing a panic attack – “take a deep breath.” There are good physiological reasons for doing exactly this, as a deep breath both calms the nervous system and causes more oxygen to enter the body.

Given that we understand that the Hebrew word for spirit – ru’ah – also means and can be translated ‘wind’ and ‘breath’ then I think we can also hear Jesus telling us to take a great inhalation of the spirit – the Holy Spirit. Exercise your faith, take a deep gulp of the Spirit, and let God’s mighty Comforter ease your anxiety; let God’s wonderful Counsellor help you not only to understand but to incorporate into your very being that no matter what happens in life God will not let you go, that God will continue to treasure and uplift you.

Once you have taken that deep breath of the Spirit and calmed yourself, you might begin to realize that you are in good company with many other good and faithful people who fall both in the middle of this spectrum between zealotry and secularism and are solidly in the middle of God’s kingdom. People of deep but not showy faith, people who quietly converse with God in prayer, who quietly go about the business of the kingdom, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, visiting the lonely. People who are so busy carrying God’s love to others that they don’t have time to worry about themselves. People who give generously of themselves and what they have, and don’t care who knows it – in fact, prefer that nobody except God and themselves know it. People who are so busy thanking God for their blessings that they have neither time nor desire nor need to ask for either more attention or a new SUV. People who instead of saying “look at me” through their loving actions say instead “let me help you see God”.

Yes, such individuals exist – and on this Sunday I give thanks here at Central both for people who heed this call to true and humble righteousness, and for a congregation that helps those who are seeking the kingdom to find it. So, take a deep breath, inhale fully the goodness of God, and be re-energized to carry on seeking the kingdom of God.