

Being a Non-Anxious Presence  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Psalm 126; Joel 2:21-27; Matthew 6:(24)25-33

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For five years, beginning in 1988, Lynn and I were directors of a Habitat for Humanity affiliate in Southwestern Pennsylvania, coal mining country. We would host work camps who would bring their time and energy, and sometimes even skills for our house renovations with families in need. On several occasions, women from Wellesley College made the ten hour drive to spend their spring break with us, and one year they convinced our volunteer work camp coordinator to take them on a tour of the coal mine where he worked. Lynn and I went along.

While I recall being underground and seeing the longwall mining equipment and the conveyor belts in action, what lingers as much in my memory is the time we spent above ground in a safety seminar that was almost as long as the time we spend below ground. I knew of issues of mine safety, and how miners would prepare. But this was no longer general safety information seminar. This was our safety. I paid attention.

I share this to introduce our Gospel lesson, which is part of what we call the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel, which itself is probably best known for the Beatitudes, those "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the peacemakers..." sayings often put on posters. While I don't often think in terms of "favorite Bible verses," I have always loved the language in today's lesson as Jesus teaches about anxiety and trust.

This morning, as we read his words, I invite us to hear them not as general information, but as if we are sitting in that mine safety room before heading underground into the mine. Jesus is preparing his listeners to begin a mission. So, when we hear him say, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink...", he is not offering an empty platitude for a refrigerator magnet. Jesus is saying, "When you go forth in mission, in my name, do not be anxious. Trust God will take care of you."

So, let us picture ourselves sitting with Jesus on a hillside, or in that mine safety seminar, or coming to be with us as we face a current challenge that has us anxious. Let us listen to Jesus, who on this Sunday, we regard as Christ the King, and let us hear his assurance for this mission we call life. Matthew 6:25-33:

*<sup>25</sup>Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? <sup>26</sup>Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?<sup>27</sup> And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?<sup>28</sup> And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup>yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. <sup>30</sup>But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?<sup>31</sup> Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' <sup>32</sup>For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. <sup>33</sup>But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

Either Jesus does not know the rules of a pep rally, or perhaps the Sermon on the Mount was not a pep rally. Did you catch how, right in the middle of our reading, Jesus sneaks in the phrase, “you of little faith.” It sounds like a deflating slight to me. I mean, he is preparing these new disciples to set forth on a mission he knows will make them anxious, and he tells them that anxiety makes their faith little. It seems a lesson in how not to keep people excited. Yet, Jesus probably has it about right.

If the disciples had large faith, his teaching about anxiety might not have been needed. And if they had no faith, there would be no point of connection. Little faith seems to work, and I would suggest it can work for us as well if we seek to enter into the teaching. It opens us to understand there are degrees of faith, and ease our minds when we have doubts about how strong our faith is at a certain time or in a particular circumstance. I suspect few of us have not thought or said something like, “Sometimes I wonder how strong my faith is.”

Yet, before we look further into Jesus’ teaching, let’s look back at the verses of the prophecy of Joel we read in our Hebrew Scripture lesson. Joel is set in a time when the people have experienced drought, plagues of locusts, and attacks of enemies. The resulting famine has affected all of creation. In our reading the prophet issues words of hope, first to the land – “Do not fear, O soil.” – then to the animals – “Do not fear, you animals of field and pasture.” – then finally to the people – “Children of Zion, abundant rain will finally fall.”

The promise of God is clear: “Trust me. You will eat again! You will know again I am in the midst of you, I am your God, and you, my people, will not be shamed.”

Trust in God. It is pretty much a given of faith. The first question for those ordained in the Presbyterian Church begins, “Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior...” Our nation even makes it mandatory to put it on our money: “In God We Trust.” Frankly, I think Jesus would find that either cynically humorous or downright heretical, but then that is probably a whole other sermon.

Yet, as I have considered our lessons this morning, I have found another solicitor vying for our vow of trust: self-sufficiency. I find we have a near universal reverence for self-sufficiency. Many are attracted to human interest stories of people who are living off the electrical grid, or who grow most of their own food, or can do most any repair needed.

We value self-sufficiency, in part, because we shun dependency. Young people seek to be self-sufficient to free themselves from dependence on their parents, and most parents appreciate this desire. Older adults seek to remain self-sufficient so they are not a burden on their children; that is, unless their children have done something that makes them want to become a burden. We do not want to owe anyone anything, other than perhaps those impersonal banks or corporations who provide loans for home or car purchases loans, or credit to allow us to live beyond our means.

We say we trust in God, but then seem to append to our trust the motto, “God helps those who help themselves.” In seeking to find the source of that saying, it was interesting to find one reference to it being Hezekiah 6:1. Of course, Hezekiah is not a book of the Bible, and “God helps those who help themselves,” is nowhere found in Scripture, though it is often spoken as biblical truth.

The message in both our Joel and Matthew readings is to trust God to provide. In Joel, the people were called to trust the promise the drought and plagues would end, and rain would fall. In Matthew, Jesus is calling his followers to trust their needs would be provided on their mission to unknown places. Trust – trust God. Now, I will tell you, if you want to raise anxiety in a church, just sit in a session meeting dealing with finances, or pledges running a bit behind, and offer the teaching to just trust God. The few dreamers among the elders love it, but the majority raise banners of anxiety with the slogan, “Let’s be realistic.”

My suggestion this morning is what seems to be our cultural worship of self-sufficiency runs counter to Jesus’ teaching, and that most of us are “little faith” people who can learn a bit about anxiety for both our own lives, and the life of the church.

Jesus’ teaching about the lilies of the field is liting, and the birds of the air imagery has a quaintness. Yet, his intention is not to be poetic but poignant. Lilies do not decide whether or not they will trust God. It would be silly to think of a bird pondering the option of being self-sufficient, or the hummingbird on the cover planting his own lantana plant so it did not have to rely on nature. Lilies and birds have a built in trust God will provide for them.

Yet, we humans have minds, and minds give us options to secure their own provisions, thinking it will lessen anxiety. Our minds test our trust in God, by mulling over the “what if’s” of life, or making sure we have covered all those “worst case scenarios,” often by stockpiling our own provisions, and being sure we have all the safety equipment in place. I myself am an expert in “worse case scenario” speculations.

The message of our lessons is clear: the mission of God is to provide. I believe there is also a message that God’s provision is best realized in a community of interdependence, not a hermitage of self-sufficiency. This is where our lessons speak to us as Christ’s church. Let me offer a personal example.

In my ministry, including while in seminary, I have served a number of churches in urban settings, one in the heart of Chicago, but mostly in mid-size or smaller cities. What I have realized is I do not have the gifts for urban ministry, as does one of my good friends from seminary. I had envisioned myself walking the streets as the people’s pastor, being gifted in community organization from a faith perspective, and changing an urban landscape. A part of me felt I was letting God down if I could not be like my friend; fortunately, I realized fairly early on that was not my calling. As such, I have appreciated working with both staff and church members who were gifted in such vitally important ministry. I was gratefully dependent on them and their gifts.

I have used the term, “non-anxious presence” in the sermon title. It is a term often used about individual leadership, of one who can enter a tense situation to help ease anxiety. Just this week, as I spoke with the presbytery’s stated clerk about work myself and two other ministers are doing with another church in the presbytery, he suggested the church will benefit from our team being a “non-anxious presence” as the session works through some difficult questions.

My use of the term this morning expands it from any single individual or team to the whole church, where together, we support each other to quell the anxieties in our own lives, as well as those of the congregation. Within this congregation, we find a beautiful interdependency of gifts and skills as we look at our ministries of prayer and care, youth and education, hospitality and mission, worship and music. We have determined some require staff, and all benefit from having a building.

In supporting the ministries of this congregation with our financial gifts, we are acknowledging our dependence on each other to fill the gaps where our individual time, energy or ability cannot reach. I believe this marks God providing for us, and our interdependence enables us to be non-anxious presences to one another.

We also look past these walls to the work of other churches in our presbytery, such as the Roxbury Church whose mission we support in our budget, or to the other regional or international missions we support in their work with the homeless, the hungry, the poor. If Jesus' mission is to send his disciples into places that are unknown and likely frightening, beyond the safe confines of their community or region or nation, then we can rejoice there are those with the skills, time, and many times the courage and trust in God to be in ministry on our behalf. In this way, we are joyfully dependent on them to broaden the reach of this congregation.

Before ending, I do not want to discount the anxieties caused by the extreme violence in our world. I addressed this in my note in this week's emailed newsletter. I expect to touch on it more in next week's sermon, with Advent lessons about signs of the end times, but I think in the midst of such anxiety, we can support each other in keeping our trust in God front and center.

For this morning, I am drawn to how our lessons on trust and anxiety speak to our national Thanksgiving celebration. I am thinking that when we gather and give thanks this week, we might consider avoiding those laundry list prayers of what we call blessings. Certainly some are from God, but we pretty much know there are things with which we bless ourselves and give God credit. I am not sure God wants that credit. I believe God promises to provide the basics, and considers much of the rest as excess fluff and personal luxury, self-blessings for our own comfort, convenience, or pride of ownership. I would like to close with a Thanksgiving prayer I believe fits with our lesson this morning. Let us pray:

"Thank you God, for providing the basics of life for us, and forgive us for our excesses, particularly any of which we consider ourselves deserving. Reveal to us our 'ye of little faith' ways, when we trust our self-sufficiency more than you.

Remind us, also, O God, to thank you for providing those upon who we depend:

- ✦ family and colleagues who graciously fill the gaps of our inadequacies at home, work or school;
- ✦ men and women who joyfully share skills we do not possess;
- ✦ friends and strangers whose non-anxious presence tempers our anxieties and reveals your grace;
- ✦ those with little, who model great dependence on you, and thereby challenge us to greater trust in you as our provider.
- ✦ and we thank you for Jesus Christ, who by the Holy Spirit promises to be our non-anxious presence in this mission called life, and we thank you for his teaching us that, "God helps those who help...each other. Amen."