

The last few weeks have been something of a roller coaster ride, haven't they? We have all held on for dear life as we have gotten up in the mornings and immediately reached for the newspapers or our radio or TV controls to find out what is happening on the world market overnight and what the projections are for the US market during the coming day. In spite of ourselves, almost as if we enjoy wallowing in our anxiety, we find ourselves repeatedly checking in during the day to find out what Wall Street is doing, and we rush to tear open our mail to reassure ourselves that, yes, our savings and retirement are doing as badly as we had feared.

This past week, we sighed a breath of relief that, contrary to everyone's worst fears, California had been able to sell new bonds to keep it afloat until the new budget year. Yet almost simultaneously we heard a report from our own governor, acknowledging that Tennessee's budget shortfall could end up anywhere from \$300 million to \$600 million by the end of the budget year. The words of concern spoken by our guest Wednesday night on behalf of CASA speak volumes about the sense of dread among all non-profits as they wait for the other shoe to drop. Faced with likely funding cuts from national, state and local governments, they know that hard economic times will also mean cuts in private donations and grants from foundations with earnings heavily invested in the markets.

The times, in other words, are disturbing—disturbing enough to keep us awake at night and make us wonder if a lifetime of saving and careful planning is going to be sufficient to get us through. Disturbing enough to make us wonder if in the midst of our anxiety we can afford to give attention to the calls for justice and charity being issued this week surrounding the international observance of World Food Day. What are the prospects for faith communities across our nation as we use this occasion for our traditional focus on sharing our bread with the hungry? Coming at this moment in time, dare we speak in terms of doing more?

We struggle to live by the good news of the gospel in difficult times. But, to be honest, the times always have their difficulties, their challenges. I recall in the early days of the struggle for control in the Southern Baptist Convention, a fellow pastor calling churches to look beyond tending to their own interests and investing themselves in our shared mission. “But,” he noted other pastors often responded, “our church is in a special situation. We can't do that now.” Churches, the speaker noted, are *always* in special situations. They always have very good reasons for focusing their attention upon themselves. And so it is with each of us. We always have very legitimate needs and concerns that raise serious questions about just how much we can do.

Seeking some relief, turn then to our text for this morning. Despite how we tend to personalize the situation and focus it upon us and our situation, we need to be mindful that Matthew's Jesus is addressing the situations in which his initial band of disciples and the church of the last quarter of the first century found themselves. Jesus' very human disciples struggled with human weaknesses and responsibilities. Some of them apparently desired wealth and were anxious to see the day Jesus would set up his kingdom. Others probably remembered families left behind in a day when the only social security and child welfare systems resided in the faithful provision of sons and fathers. Surely, they worried about the future for themselves and for those for whom they were responsible. Matthew's own contemporary church lived its daily life under the cloud of a temple and beloved city that lay in ruins even as Jesus' followers struggled with alienation and looming persecution within the cities and among the people they had known as home and family. Like the first disciples, Matthew's church needed a word of reassurance in the midst of turmoil.

Jesus' admonition not to worry certainly seems to sound an appropriate note both for his day and for ours. Yet if we look closely, there are some aspects of what he says that are anything but reassuring. While reasonable, his suggestion that worry changes nothing (v. 27) doesn't exactly raise our spirits; and his counsel that we not worry about tomorrow because tomorrow will have worries of its own (v. 34) seems to confirm our worst suspicions. Even more important, does Jesus' reassurance that if we strive for the kingdom of God and its righteousness, “all these things” will be ours (v. 33) actually become the source of a new anxiety? Does it come dangerously close to degenerating into salvation by works? Where is the good news of the gospel?

Who will define reality for us? Taking a moment to focus on the quiet, spectacular wonders of creation, the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, may bring a moment of reprieve that will give us a chance to regain our footing. But actually what Jesus is calling for is more than a moment of enjoying nature. His command to “consider” the beneficence of God's creation calls for more than just a passing consideration. A word of strength, the Greek word “consider” means to study diligently, to pay careful attention, to intentionally center our thoughts and being. The focus is not just an appreciation of beauty, but appreciation of the total adequacy of the one who provides. That God would so clothe “the grass of the field,” a phrase signifying something totally lacking in value, speaks of a creator who graciously gives far more than enough. The focus is upon God.

Far from another legalistic code that calls upon us to get a grip upon ourselves and get to work, it is a word of grace, not unlike the word of grace that resounds through scripture in the face of every era of threat and devastation Israel and the church encounter: “Do not be afraid; I am with you; I will help you.” When it comes to crisis and worry, we return to our roots—roots planted firmly in grace. Writing to Christians, perhaps even new Christians, Matthew calls them to the grace that has birthed them; and then he says, “*Therefore . . . do not worry about your life*” (v. 25). Far from a grasping at salvation, far from the requirement that we pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount, the ethics of Jesus is about seeing everything about ourselves and our world in terms of who God is. The good news is that God is not against us, but for us. And that is enough.

We live toward the kingdom of God. Quieting ourselves by dwelling upon God's compassionate care can point our way out of the vicious cycle of worry that can so dominate us, but more than giving us a leg up on just surviving, it calls us to hope—hope for

ourselves and our situation and hope for the world. And, yes, it does call us to work. In the words of David Garland, it “triggers our imagination.” Confronted with the issues that beset our world today and the issues that always confront our world in one way or another, it raises our eyes to see new possibilities even in the midst of the turmoil that surrounds us. Dare we talk in days like these about the challenge of world hunger? Dare we even think about the Millennium Development Goals set by 189 of the world’s leaders that anticipated wiping out extreme poverty by the year 2015? Given the world economic crisis, dare we even speak in those terms?

More important, given our commitment to the God who has come to us in various and sundry ways through the history of Israel and in Jesus Christ, dare we think in terms of setting those goals aside? Faith in the God of Israel and Jesus gives expression to hope for God’s children—all of God’s children—or it is not faith in the God of Israel and Jesus. Worship of that God calls us to see new possibilities and to give our lives toward turning those possibilities into reality. We live, in the words of Walter Brueggemann’s popular book on God’s *shalom*, “toward a vision.” That vision encompasses all of the world and defines the reality by which we make our decisions. It is, in a term that is popular among ethicists, *countercultural*. It takes its reading of what is realistic, what is possible from a different source than does the world in which we live. As Patrick Miller puts it,

In a world that assumes the *status quo*, that things have to be the way they are and that we must not assume too much about improving them, the doxologies of God’s people are fundamental indicators that wonders have not ceased, that possibilities not yet dreamt of will happen, and that hope is an authentic stance [Theology Today, 1988, p. 186].

“Resurrection,” Miller continues, “defies all human categories.” And so, we gather every Sunday morning to give praise to the God who brings hope out of the grave. And on this basis we construct the hope and work of our lives.

Dorothy Soelle tells the story of Rabbi Mendel, who wanted to see what heaven and hell were like. Elijah, the prophet, volunteered to take him around and show him. First, he took him down a corridor to a large room. Inside the room there was a roaring fire, a long table with bowls of soup on it and a large group of people sitting around the table with spoons. The people, however, were starving to death, because the spoons had handles on them longer than their arms and they could not get them to their mouths to eat. Rabbi Mendel ran quickly from the room, and Elijah took him to a second room. Inside the room was a roaring fire, a long table with bowls of soup on it and a large group of people sitting around the table with spoons. Once again, the spoons had handles longer than the people’s arms. Unlike the people, in the first room, however, the people here were well fed. They were using their spoons to feed one another. *This was heaven.*

We live toward the vision of God’s kingdom where hunger is met as God’s children extend themselves to meet the needs of one another. What else can the church of Jesus Christ do on this World Hunger Day when people across our nation and around a world take a stand against hunger and poverty? What else can we do and be other than voices of hope and hands and feet and hearts of dedication and resolve that the needs of none go unmet?