

In God's Arms

As some of you know, I have, for the past several years, been an active user of Facebook, that post-modern version of the party line in which everyone in a defined community knows the business of everyone else in that community and some of their broader connections besides. I love the way that the application makes it possible for me to stay in touch with friends and family who are far away. I've lived so many places in my life and known so many likewise mobile people that I have friends on five continents and in most of the states of our union. Thanks to Facebook, I can share their joys and sorrows in near to real time. And while I enjoy sharing the good times best, it is also a comfort to me to be a comfort to them when disappointment, sickness, or death darken the lives of my family and friends.

What I enjoy far less these days is how Facebook becomes an instant news and opinion service. Just like the professional news media, bad news tends to lead. There is something in our human instinct that makes us quicker to share negatives than positives – perhaps an ancient impetus to protect our tribe from danger. Unlike the professional news media, or at least unlike the way I learned about journalism, on Facebook, opinions are promulgated with the same weight as facts. The result can be an unhealthy stew of anger, self-righteousness, and hatred that turns a browsing session from a relaxing check-in with friends to an anxiety-producing round of abuse.

As Facebook has shifted from a pleasant pastime to an apprehensive form of social combat, I've been thinking about previous crests of angst in our nation's recent history. The political pendulum of the United States has swung fairly wildly in my lifetime, with cycles of four to twelve years. Generally speaking, those who experience the most *tsuris* are those whose party is out of power, with the occasional Constitutional or economic crisis turning up the heat on everyone. I'm reminded especially of the years of the Reagan presidency. Ronald Reagan, dubbed "Ronnie Rayguns" by the left when he was still Governor of California, was regarded in some quarters with as much horror as President Trump is today. Between his administration's partial dismantling of the social protections of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, the teetering of the economy in those years and the final convulsions of the Cold War, life in the 80s was tense for almost everyone. Little wonder then that two of the biggest hits of that decade in the pop music field should be encouragements to "Relax" and to "Don't Worry, Be Happy."

For those of you who were too young to remember or simply not paying attention to pop music during that decade, a brief outline. "Relax," was a dance hit from the English band, Frankie Goes to Hollywood, which reached number one in the U.K. in 1984 and number ten in the U.S. in 1985. It's an odd song to have an anti-stress theme: the throbbing bass line and explosive percussion are great for the dance floor but not so much for, well, relaxing. Its popularity, however, spawned a line of t-shirts proclaiming, "Frankie Say Relax," and a number of other aphorisms and rejoinders. You'll see one such copy-cat graphic on the front of the bulletin. In practice, these were printed on white t-shirts, generally worn with ripped out collars and sleeves by young women, Madonna-style. That's Madonna the pop star of the same decade, not the mother of Jesus, by the way.

The other great anti-stress hit of the 80s had music that more obviously suited the theme. Long-time jazz singer Bobby McFerrin wrote, recorded and released the *a cappella* "Don't Worry, Be Happy" in 1988, when it held the number one spot in the U.S. pop chart for two weeks. The gentle, lilting song, in which a multi-tracked McFerrin accompanied himself with a variety of

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vocal hums and trills, was inspired by a poster containing the title words in a quote from the self-proclaimed "avatar of God" from India, Meher Baba. "Don't Worry, Be Happy" won numerous awards and was ubiquitous as a song, a saying, and wearable art much like "Relax."

These songs were hardly unique in the 80s for their pleas to a stressed-out generation to unwind. If you were listening to more progressive rock as I was at the time, you might also cite Peter Gabriel's album, "So," which contained a duet ballad with Kate Bush entitled "Don't Give Up" and the achingly beautiful "Mercy Street," in which Gabriel sings of "Looking for mercy / In your daddy's arms." I mention this latter especially because it picks up a theme to be found in our scriptures for this morning, particularly our Psalm and the reading from Isaiah. For many of us, the ultimate picture of safety and relaxation is to be found in our memories of the embrace of a loving parent. For some, that will be, as Gabriel sang, "mercy in your daddy's arms." For more, I suspect, it is the picture of being held by one's mother. The psalmist uses the images of being a nursing child or even a nursing mother. For Isaiah, God is comparable to the nursing mother, tenderly caring for the child of her womb.

In the reading from Isaiah, the reassurance of God as loving mother comes at a time of great joy and great stress for Israel. Judging both from its message and its context in the overall structure of the Book of Isaiah, this passage is written to the Judeans who are planning to return from Babylon to Judah with the blessings of their new Persian overlords. While we can have no doubt that the invitation to return home from their place of exile must have been greeted with excitement, relief, and happiness, there is also no doubt that the prospect must have been daunting. Travel, mostly by foot over nearly a thousand miles and taking four months in the heat of the summer, would be dangerous and difficult. Despite the promise of the prophet that the journey would seem easy under God's protection, with mountain passes seeming like an easy road, there was reason to be anxious. And who knew what they would find when they reached their destination? Zion had been abandoned for years. But God promises that neither they nor their land have been forgotten.

If you have moved as many times as I have to a far-away and relatively unknown place, this passage will speak volumes to you. But even if you've lived within one region your whole life, the daily journey through life reveals the metaphorical worth of these promises. Which of us has not braced themselves for a change in class, in job, in living conditions? Even the most stable life has ups and downs as we make and lose friends, begin and switch careers, say goodbye to older generations and welcome younger ones. God's promise to us all is that God never forgets us, that we are as dear to God as a child to its mother. We are, God promises, engraved on the palms of God's hands.

As we take comfort from and relax into the promises in Isaiah, let's move to our passage from Matthew. Our pew Bibles break these verses into two sections, one headed "Serving Two Masters" and the other "Do Not Worry," but for once I'm inclined to agree with the editors of the lectionary. These verses are all of a piece and they address one of the most pernicious evils of our times: worry about money.

Perhaps you are surprised to hear me describe worry about money as an evil. To be worried about money seems like prudence, not evil. After all, we all want to be sure that we have enough

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to sustain us in our retirement or to get our kids through college or to buy a house or simply to pay rent and buy groceries and medicine. Worrying about personal finances or the finances of the institutions we cherish is a virtue, isn't it?

The problem is that the virtue of thrift or the wisdom of fiscal planning can rapidly turn into a sinful state of worry if we are not very careful. You see, if we become obsessed with worry over money, if we make all our decisions based on the bottom line rather than on spiritual concerns, then we have taken God off the throne of our lives and placed something else there – that dark and tricky thing that Jesus called “mammon.”

That's an odd word, isn't it? I'll bet that many of you remember that for years we read translations of verse 24 that said, “You cannot serve God and mammon.” In our NRSV, it's translated as “wealth,” and that's a perfectly acceptable translation. But that word, “mammon,” has deeper layers. Yes, it means wealth and it's the Greek transliteration of a word from the Aramaic language that Jesus and his contemporaries spoke. It meant wealth or treasure or simply money. But the root of the word comes from an older Aramaic word yet that meant, “That which can be trusted.” In times much older than Jesus, when the barter economy in the Middle East changed over to a money economy, people had to be convinced that buying and selling with money was just as safe as the familiar barter of x number of hours of work for a chicken, or so many bolts of homespun cloth for a cow. Money was “that which can be trusted.”

But it's a funny thing about money, says Jesus. It's easy to steal, for one thing, so you have to spend time and energy deciding how to keep it safe. And, as Jesus makes clear in some of his parables, the more you have of it, the more you want. One never seems to have quite enough money. In the Gospel According to Luke, Jesus calls it, “untrustworthy mammon” – you can't really trust this thing you are supposed to trust, in other words.

And yet, over the centuries since Jesus taught, human beings have continued to put their trust in money, serving mammon when instead they should have been serving God. I've done it myself. When Connie and I found out that she was expecting our third child (that's Sean), I was working in a job that in many ways represented a fulfillment of what I thought God was calling me to do with my life. I was working for the A. D. Players in Houston, a professional theatre company with a Christian worldview and mission. I was Administrative Director or Chief Operating Officer for the company – all administrative decisions came across my desk and I oversaw accounting, box office, booking, fundraising, marketing and public relations. In that role, I was successful in turning around a deepening deficit and getting the company back on track financially. I was also Assistant Artistic Director, second only to the founder as a voice on artistic matters and so I oversaw the literary and production departments as well as our Studio, which ran a busy schedule of classes for all ages. In this aspect of my job, I was able to convince the Artistic Director to expand our programming in a way that both stretched our company artistically and paid off at the box office. I was acting and directing and teaching. It wasn't paradise – it was hard work and there were some difficult issues to deal with. But the prospect of trying to raise three children when my half of our joint income was so low was the final straw. I got scared and started looking elsewhere for work. I wasn't able to get my worry about money off the throne and let God be in God's rightful place. And so, I ended up at Stage One: The Louisville Children's Theatre. It was a fine institution but I'd taken the job for the wrong

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reasons and my heart wasn't in it. Within three years, I was burned out and looking to God for answers that God had, in fact, already given me.

It happened to me again when I left Taproot Theatre Company. I think most of you know that I was managing director there for almost three years. Again, I felt like I was right where God wanted me to be when I was there. Again, it was hard work but very worthwhile. My motivations for leaving Taproot were different and, I think, better than when I left A. D. Players. It was during the recession of 2001-2002 and we had to cut the budget. Personnel was the only place left to cut. It was either me or three other administrative staffers or a program that served kids. I offered for it to be me and Scott Nolte, the founder of the company, reluctantly agreed. I don't have any regrets about that. What I do regret is what happened after. Rather than waiting on the Lord to put me where I was supposed to be, I panicked and accepted another job based on monetary concerns; based, frankly, on fear. It was two miserable years for us in Evansville and I thank God that the Spirit moved me to start the process of changing careers for the pastorate just as you all were looking for a pastor. In the twelve years we have worked together, my family and I have been richly blessed. I don't know what might have happened had I blocked out the voice of mammon screaming in my head and listened instead for God but I'm sure that God would have blessed the Boyers and Good Shepherd Baptist whether together or separately.

Now, I'm not telling you these stories to gain your sympathy or your admiration or anything of the sort. I'm telling you this to say to you all, "I understand." I understand what it is like to worry about money. I understand what it's like to allow the spirit of scarcity drown out the Spirit of God. I understand and I say to you, it does not work. Prudence is a virtue. Planning is wise. But if we let our prudence or our plans or fear of scarcity rule our lives instead of listening carefully for the will of God and seeking first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, then we have fallen from the way of Jesus. And getting back up can be hard.

I don't know about you, but I worry about other things, too. I worry about whether I'm giving people the right advice, I worry about whether I'm effectively communicating what God's putting on my heart – I'm worried about that right now, in fact. I worry for my children as they navigate their own lives. I worry that my peculiar personality quirks will ultimately push away people that I care about. I'm a worrier. But Jesus reminds me not to get caught up in this trap. If I seek the kingdom, if I hunger and thirst after righteousness, then these things will work themselves out. As long as I do what I know how to do, listening for the voice of God rather than allowing the voices of fear to drown out the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit, then all shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well. That's what Julian of Norwich said. "It'll all be OK in the end; if it isn't OK, it isn't the end" – that's what Connie Boyer says. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" – that's the old King James Version of what Jesus said. "Today's trouble is enough for today." Or as our friend Rev. Steven Greenebaum quipped to me the other day, "the difference between sacred and scared is all in how you "c" things."

I do think I'm worrying less as I get older. I hope someday to be as wise as the lilies of the field and the birds of the air – and that's not the same as being bird-brained. They don't worry – the flowers and the birds – they simply are. At some deep level, they feel the love of God. Even in the bleak midwinter, to borrow a phrase, all creation gives witness to God's love. In the last few

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years, I have often quoted the Kentucky farmer and poet, Wendell Berry, and in his poem, "The Peace of Wild Things," he writes this:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

I am comforted that even a wise man like Wendell Berry still struggles against anxiety. Surely, we all do at some level. One of the great men of faith of the Fourth Century was the hermit, Makarios of Egypt, who founded a still-continuing monastery and is recognized as a saint by both Catholic and Orthodox Christians. Makarios wrote, "I am convinced that not even the apostles, although filled with the Holy Spirit, were therefore completely free from anxiety... Contrary to the stupid view expressed by some, the advent of grace does not mean the immediate deliverance from anxiety." There is hope for us yet.

So, take heart, my friends. We are children of the Heavenly Father, the God in whose womb all things are created and who nourishes us with spiritual milk from God's own breast. Let us remind each other to listen, not to the panicky voices of mammon and of scarcity but instead to the still, small voice of the Spirit of God. Let us watch the birds and, when they come up, the flowers. Let us learn from the peace of wild things. And let us put our faith in promise of Jesus, who said, "seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you." Let us relax in the loving arms of God. Amen.