

Matthew 6:19-21,24-34
I Corinthians 3:18 – 4:5
February 20, 2011

Forward in Faith

So this woman had been sort of the keeper of the family heirlooms after her parents died and the time had come to send some things to her brother and sister. She packs up two old family bibles very carefully, addresses the boxes and takes them down to the post office to ship off. Would you like to purchase some insurance? Is there anything breakable in their Mam? Says the postal clerk to the customer. The woman gets a grin on her face and replies, “only the Ten Commandments.”

Yes the Ten Commandments get broken every day but it may be that the command that is most often broken is “be not afraid.” The angel tells Mary to fear not when word comes of her pregnancy. “Do not be Afraid,” says the Angel to the shepherds who are out in the fields keeping sheep on the night of the birth. Jesus implores his disciples in his Sermon on the Mount, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, what you will wear.” Almost 100 times the bible says directly do not fear. Yet we live in a fretful society. Anxiety medications are advertised on

TV and we worry and we scurry with worry. The economy gives us a scare. Politicians worry us. Wars are fought, people are victims of crime. We are afraid of bills and the safety of our children makes us fear. There are trauma's that are real, no doubt about it; but in many cases our worries and fears are disproportionate to our actual experience. I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened. So Said Mark Twain.

It is said that the command to "fear not" is the most repeated request of scripture; and the least obeyed. Without quantifying it, without conducting a scientific study; I would have to go ahead and say that worry and fear are indeed spiritual challenges that delay and impair our formation and maturing. And besides that we are urged by Jesus to avoid this preoccupation and he had a pretty decent sense of humanity.

I really am touched by the bucolic scene that Jesus paints so beautifully in this passage. I see the beauty in the lilies and others flowers. I garden. I cultivate flowers. I love to watch the birds – I feed them. I have binoculars and bird guides. Take time to smell the flowers and watch the birds. Go out into nature and pray. Chill out –

Don't worry be happy with Bobby McFerrin and Jesus. I do that and yet I am constantly chasing away the squirrels so that I can enjoy the birds. The "dogone" squirrels annoy the heck out of me. I love to throw a snowball just behind a squirrel and have it burst into snowball shrapnel. That gets em. I buy sulfur spray to keep the mildew off my flowers. Its organic. Sometimes you need copper dust to help the roses. Then you need neem oil to get the bugs. I have garden books. I make compost. I purchase fertilizer. I have a sprayer – I am going to get those bugs.....

Seems like it is easy to turn the gifts of God into worry and chore; Yup Jesus knew what he was talking about. Fear nukes our faith. Tension closes our hearts to the Holy. Anxiety crowds out the Sacred. Charlie Brown once quipped in a Peanuts cartoon that he had developed a new policy, he only dreaded one day at a time. Dale Carnegie once said that if you are so worried you can't sleep get up and do something . The lack of sleep won't kill you but the worry will. We need to find ways to move Forward in Faith. If there are stages on the faith journey, then we need to find the way to the next level of peace.

It is interesting that there is so much worry in our North American Culture. Remember Maslow's theory that there is a hierarchy of need. Maslow claimed that the most basic of needs were physiological; food, water, sleep, air and then safety, love and belonging followed by esteem and those needs being met, we become self actualized and can meet our potential. Maslow's theory of course has been challenged but there is a basic truth to his thought. If you are hungry and thirsty and in danger then it is hard for you to be free from fear and worry. We live in a relatively safe society and we are well fed and hydrated; yet we worry. These people to whom Jesus was preaching in his Sermon on the Mount – they knew hunger and their health was weakened as a result of long term deficiencies and still he was urging them to trust in God. Basic needs were often not met and yet he was asking them to trust in God.

These passages we had read this morning are about worry and fear as challenges to faith. They also are about leadership and stewardship. Some theologians argue that if you move forward in faith, if you trust in God, if you step ahead in discipleship you will be rewarded with financial blessing. Some television preachers like Joel Osteen for instance might go so far to say or at least to imply

that if you support their ministry with a tax deductible donation then you will be showered with financial rewards. Making this direct link: do discipleship- get ahead and get money. This approach is known as the prosperity Gospel. Pastor Michelle and I would be engaging in prosperity Gospel preaching if we said something like, "If you support the New Forward in Faith Capital Funds Campaign with generous stewardship, then God will reward you and your family with Financial Blessings." Essentially we would be claiming that we know God well enough to know that there is a cause and effect relationship between your stewardship and your future personal levels of wealth. And we would be claiming that the Bible teaches this cause and effect relationship.

This prosperity gospel is a tempting theology in which to trust. We do good for God and God will get us the money. Hey what's wrong with that? God is good and God is generous. We believe that. Scripture does talk about blessing and blessings and that they come from God. Scripture says faith is a blessing that leads to blessings. It's not too far a step to say that financial faith and generous stewardship are blessings that will lead to financial blessing. Kind of like invest in the corporation of God, trust in the Kingdom of Heaven

Company, bank The Realm of Holy Credit Union and your dividends will be boundless. Your stock will always be up. In fact I surely believe that generous stewardship strengthens faith, shapes sacred hearts, forms deeper trust and is a source of joy; it's just that I cannot say with even a smidge of integrity that God will reward us with wealth. I am not saying God won't, but if you make that a direct correlation in your mind and in your faith talk – you have crossed the line. Faithful discipleship and wise and generous stewardship clearly move people forward in faith; but there is absolutely no guarantee that forward in faith means do ray me in the pocket or moolah moolah in the bank.

One of the basic theologies that Jesus challenged was in fact prosperity gospel thinking. A lot of first century people thought that wealth was a specific sign of God's blessing - to which Jesus replied Blessed are the Poor. A lot of first century people believed that Good Health was a reward to the better, cooler, more loved by God people - to which Jesus replied, let me touch this leper and heal him, let me help this physically challenged person to walk. Let me touch this ritually unclean blind person and heal their sight. "Your faith has made you well." He often told them. It was the moving forward in

faith that was the blessing all its own. Jesus is holding up a choice. We can choose to trust in wealth or we can choose to trust in God. If we choose wealth as our priority, we can expect great highs and devastating lows. If we choose God, then in Good times and bad we have far less reason to worry.¹

So we have this Capital Campaign on our horizon. It's our seventh capital funds campaign because we have a mega mortgage and because we have a building that gets much use and needs some loving care and some improvements. The church will ask us all to pray about supporting Forward in Faith – the name for our stewardship effort. The church will then ask us to pray about our level of giving and lastly Ark and Dove will ask us to pledge. For the uninitiated and unsuspecting, yes this means a second pledge, an additional level of support, another layer of prayer. You should support Forward in Faith if it will accomplish just that. That's what each one of us gets to decide in the coming months, whether Forward in Faith will actually move us Forward in Faith. If the answer is yes, we get to show our level of support in late April and May.

¹ Barbara J Essex in Feasting on the Word Year A Advent Through Transfiguration page 406, Westminster John Know Press Louisville Kentucky 2010

We have been spending a great deal of time this winter reading Paul's first letter to the Christian Church in Corinth. This morning's few verses are about the stewardship of leadership. There was some fussing going down in Corinth and Paul was trying to address many layers of dysfunction with his letter. One challenge at Corinth was that some folk were saying they were loyal to Paul who started the church and some people were loyal to Apollos who was a gifted preacher and much more interesting than Rabbi Paul and some people were loyal to Cephas. Paul's point was that the church was called to be loyal to Christ and in that way they would be able to move forward in faith.

On a day when we ordain and install elders and on a day when we install deacons as church leaders, it is good for us all to remember that we should stay loyal to Christ. Differences of opinion are quite common and normal in churches as they are in any place there is human interaction. Hopefully what is different in the church is how these differences in opinion get worked out. The church moves forward in faith when people set aside personal differences for the future and benefit of the community. Churches work best when they work on consensus. One philosopher quipped that is hard to roll up

your sleeves when you are wringing your hands. Elders and deacons are people who have been called to roll up their sleeves. In our Presbyterian way of thinking we are not called to revere our elders deacons and pastors as much as we are called to appreciate their sharing of gifts. Shifting angles I would report to you that most church leaders at Ark and Dove who have served as elders and Deacons have been grateful for the opportunity. To roll up sleeve is to take on commitment; but most often the movement forward in faith is well worth the sweat.

Leadership, Stewardship, Discipleship these things are fear breakers. When we engage, we move Forward in Faith.