

**Proper 3A - St. David's
May 25, 2008**

It just seems so unJesus like. Most often in the Gospels, Jesus makes suggestions. He invites the disciples and us to consider things in a new way, to look at things differently. Very rarely does he belabor a point. But today, in the span of only ten verses, Jesus repeats the same message to the disciples five times. Apparently, he must feel like this is a critical piece of advice for all of us. What is this earth shattering thing that Jesus asks of us? Two words. "Don't worry."

Don't worry Jesus says. Well, thanks a lot. Isn't that helpful? Just stop worrying, he tells us. Easy for him to say. Jesus didn't live in our culture of anxiety. He didn't live in a world where countries have the power to blow each other off the face of the map at any moment. He didn't live in a tenement house in Los Angeles where he had better than even odds that he would be shot and killed by his 18th birthday. He didn't live in a world so full of stress that the only way out many can find is through drugs or alcohol. It is a world so full of anxiety that even though people know those substances are going to kill them, or perhaps even worse; make it impossible for their lives to be anything but

meaningless, empty and lost, many still cannot stop taking them. Jesus also did not live in a culture of fear where he was taught that success is impossible unless you worry about every aspect of your life. He did not live in a capitalist society that tells him that he must compete in a survival of the fittest mode against everyone else in his country to be a success. He did not live in a society that encourages greed, a culture that told him that he must have things he really didn't need, a society that believes shopping is a method of relaxation. He did not live in a world that makes it virtually impossible to *not* worry about money, whether you have more than everyone else and you are trying to protect it and make more of it to stay on top, or whether you don't have enough to get through tomorrow and don't know where you will get it for your next meal. No one ever told Jesus that he needed to get on the hamster wheel of competition if he was going to survive in the dog-eat-dog society.

Because we live in this world all the time, it is sometimes difficult to remember that it was not always like this. But this way of understanding life has only been with us for a relatively short period of time. Louise, Ruby and Frances all remember an age when no one had

enough time to worry much. They were too busy working from dawn to dusk on the farm every day. But in the post-modern world, we have traded that life of hard labor, known so well by the generations that preceded us, for a life of constant stress and anxiety. It is the rarest of days when I am not pastorally caring for someone who is suffering immensely with a way to deal with all that angst and anxiousness. A discussion I heard this past week from my office is commonplace in our society today. A group of people were all discussing their depression medication. All of them took something and all of them were prescribed a slightly different drug to deal with their type of anxiety. Perhaps those drugs are over-prescribed, but the truth of the matter is that every one of us has to handle exponentially more stress today than did our ancestors.

Today's Gospel then, is one of those rare occasions when we don't have to spend a lot of time interpreting Jesus' message for our day. Because the truth is, Jesus' words today apply so much more to us than they did to the people he was speaking to in the first century.

The question for us is, is it realistic in the world in which we live to do what Jesus asks? Is it even possible with the stress each of

carries today to actually stop worrying? All of us know that it would be to our benefit to do what Jesus asks. But isn't it, in fact, a bit naive to suggest such a simplistic response to the very complicated problems each of us face in today's world on a daily basis?

Such was the reaction to a woman in the 14th century who took Jesus' words today to heart. Many considered her understanding of God and the world to be hopelessly juvenile. Perhaps Julian of Norwich did not have the same anxiety issues you and I face today, but she had plenty to fret about. She lived in England during the time of the bubonic plague, the black death, as it was called, that killed 75 million people in Europe. She watched her friends and family members die painful deaths all around her. As a child, she often was very sick and at the tender age of 30 she became deathly ill and received last rites. On the seventh day of the death watch, Julian suddenly felt all of the pain leave her and she had fifteen visions of the Passion of Jesus. While everyone around her believed that the bubonic plague was a punishment from God, from that moment on, she saw it very differently. She saw God and humanity just as described in our readings from Isaiah and Psalm 131 today. We are like babies and God is the mother who could never forget the infants

she brought into this world and who continue to feed from her breast.

In a world where the church was pushing a theology of anxiety for all our sins and the retribution that would come from it, Julian, like Jesus, would say, “don’t worry.” She would say that despite “all the pains that ever were or ever shall be,” God longs to “comfort us readily and sweetly.” She then concluded with one of the most well known sentences in Christian history. Because of God’s limitless love, she said that “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”

While both Julian and Jesus’ urgings to stop worrying because everything is going to be okay may sound overly simplistic, I would like to suggest that there is much more depth than meets the eye in both of their theologies. Because both Jesus and Julian suffered tremendously in their lifetimes, it would be ridiculous to suggest that either were seeing the world through rose colored glasses. Unfortunately, some over the years, right up until today, continue to see today’s Gospel in such a pollyanna fashion. I can’t tell you how many people have interpreted Jesus’s words today to mean that God wants us to just sit around and wait for God to provide for us. I have, in fact, been told that

I lack faith when I plan for my future. Please note however, that Jesus doesn't say to us don't do, he says, don't worry. The example of the lily that Jesus uses helps us see the flawed theology in taking a laissez-faire approach to life. Even lilies strive, reaching towards the sun every day. Our call by Jesus is not to sit idly by, but to strive, to strive without worry.

In the same way, the lesson from both Jesus and Julian of Norwich is not that once we start to believe in God's compassion, we will no longer face pain and anxiety. That really is naive. Such an interpretation was attacked as early as the 5th century by Makarios, a desert father in Egypt. In rather blunt language he said, "Contrary to the stupid view expressed by some, the advent of grace does not mean the immediate deliverance from anxiety." Belief in the God of compassion will not stop the bubonic plague, but what it does do is help us realize that suffering and pain is all part of the human experience. When we handle each of these challenges with grace and a non-anxious presence, we can begin to feel God's love surrounding us, no matter what happens. That is the point of Julian's notion that all shall be well. Once again, that all sounds just wonderfully woo-woo, doesn't it?

But what happens when we do our utmost to live into that non-anxious approach, but it just doesn't work? What happens when we are overwhelmed with the angst enveloping us, as has happened to everyone of us here. Well, Jesus tells us in today's Gospel just what to do at such times. Leave. Walk away. Go outside. Take a hike. Smell a flower. Be drawn in by its beauty. Watch a hawk soar. Stalk the wild asparagus. Get lost in the beautiful details of the natural world surrounding us.

This experience does two things for us. First, it quiets our souls. And second, the lessons of nature teach us about the nature of God and why we can all stop worrying. Through nature, all of us can begin to understand that what Jesus tells us, and Julian repeated centuries later, is not pollyanna at all. It is in fact, a very complex theology, rooted in the way God created this world to interconnect with all.

The pictures you are seeing this morning come from the trip Jean and I made Easter week this year. Holy Week is always saturated with anxieties and pressures enough to lay out any Rector. But this year, with no Deacon to assist, with an ordinate number of anxious parishioners facing difficult challenges, with a church building that was

already four months behind schedule, a number of personal issues to contend with, and a killer of a schedule for the three months following, Jean and I were in desperate need of some stress reducing. We headed immediately on a search for wildflowers.

It was impossible to not be overwhelmed by the stunning display that occurred this year from our winter rains. Just as Jesus suggested, consideration of the poppies brought an immediate sense of calm to the both of us, allowing us to reduce our worrying tremendously. The more time we spent with the flowers however, the more time we had to reflect upon their deeper meaning and what is behind Jesus' words today. We had a chance to ponder their intricate designs and the many layers of beauty contained within each individual flower as well as an entire hillside of them. We noticed how the flowers had created a more bountiful, more healthy collection of insects and bees. We saw how those creatures had attracted more birds and how the entire ecosystem seemed to come alive and thrive. We, like Jesus, could not help but be moved by how God cares not just for the flowers and the birds, but all of nature. It is this example from nature that can allow all of us to stop worrying. In fact, Julian of Norwich comes to the same conclusion as

Jesus when she too has an experience through nature. She describes her experience like this; "In this vision God showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, and it was round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought "What may this be?" And it was generally answered thus: "It is all that is made." I marveled how it might last, for it seemed it might suddenly have sunk into nothing because of its littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: "It lasts and ever shall, because God loves it."

If what Jesus tells us today about God's love for the birds and the flowers is accurate, if what Julian of Norwich discovered in the hazelnut is true, if what Jean and I and many of you have experienced through the birds of the air and the flowers of the desert is valid, then there is little doubt that God cares for all of creation as well as caring for you and me. This should convince all of us that there really is no need to worry about anything of significance.

But it also offers us an answer to what may be the most difficult theological question ever. If God really is the God of compassion that Jesus and Julian experienced, if God's relationship with us and all of

creation is really like a mother, breast feeding her child as Isaiah tells us, then why praytell, is there so much pain and suffering in the world?

The answer for me comes in the very fact that God does love all of the world so much. If God does truly care for a flower in the way Jesus describes, if the hazelnut is truly loved by God for its own essence, than this loving God will allow everything in the cosmos to be. In such a world, lions do not lie down with lambs, they eat them. Genes that constantly change to create new, wonderful parts of nature, sometimes mutate the other way and become cancerous. Tectonic plates, necessary for life as we know it on this planet, will sometimes shift, causing natural disasters. By allowing everything in the universe to have its own essence and become the best that it can be, God has created a cosmic structure far richer and complex and beautiful than we could have ever dreamed. But such intense beauty comes with a cost. It also means that difficulties and suffering can never disappear.

By loving everything in the universe so much that God gave it all its own essence, God has created a world of deep meaning. What Jesus and Julian of Norwich experienced was this world that is saturated with

God's love and compassion at every level. What they tell us is about as far from pollyanna as possible. We do not need to be naive and simple minded to stop worrying. What we need to do is experience this God of compassion by finding a flower. All we need to look at are the hummingbirds just hatched on my back porch that are now the size of my smallest fingernail. All we need do is become aware of the complexity and majesty of God's world all around us. Yes, we are going to continue to be anxious and concerned about many things. But once we have the experience of Jesus and Julian, once we see first hand God's love for all of creation, then we really can put things in perspective and stop worrying, even in the intense pressures of today's world. Because we will then know that in the end, all shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well. Amen.