

Summer Theology Eucharist  
Pacific Lutheran University  
June 11, 2018  
Matthew 6:25-34

*“So, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”—Matthew 6:34 (NRSV)*

I was in a conversation with my niece last week while visiting with family in Wisconsin. In addition to her day job as the social media director for a large athletic shoe distributor, she is pursuing a career in politics as one of the bright young stars of the Wisconsin Democratic Party. (And believe me, in Wisconsin, the Democrats need as many bright young stars as they can find!) I can’t remember exactly what we were talking about but at some point in the conversation she asked me, “Do you think the world is crazier and more out of control now than it was when you graduated from high schools (1967) or are we just more anxious about it because of technology and social media?”

Her question caught me a little off guard because I hadn’t thought about it before. It stayed with me in the ensuing days as I was preparing to welcome you all to a conference on “Leading a congregation in anxious times.” Someone in the University, upon hearing the theme of our conference, remarked that it was a “timely topic.” But the reality is that congregational leadership in the face of anxiety is ***always*** a timely topic, if for no other reason than that the times are ***always*** anxious for someone in every community of faith including the pastor! When I think back on some of the conversations I was privileged to have with pastors and lay leaders who came into leadership during the depression or World War II or some of my older colleagues who worked in campus ministry during the Civil Rights and Viet Nam era of 1960s and ‘70s, often risking arrest and worse, those were anxious times in which to be called to lead. They were often working without a script and, in most cases, without a net.

How about you? Are you more anxious now than you used to be? What keeps you awake at night? I know the things that worry me or at least I think I know. And while they are different than when I was first starting out in ministry and in life, the anxiety never seems to be less acute.

I don’t know if the world is more out of control than it was 50 years ago in 1968 when I was completing my first year of college. I know the threats to life on our planet are very real and that there is a sense of urgency about climate change and our race to moral and ecological suicide. Whatever the reasons, these are certainly anxious times in which we live and are called to serve.

So we have these words of Jesus (and, unlike some of the sayings attributed to him, they appear to be words that Jesus actually said or at least very close to it). And while they have been read in a many different cultures and languages and a wide array of historical contexts over the centuries, they address what appears to be ***a universal human condition***. If we’re inclined to worry—and most of us are—there’s always an infinite

supply of things to worry about. Indeed, it's almost impossible to imagine what it might mean to lead in a situation that didn't have some measure of anxiety.

Certainly, the Galilean peasants to whom Jesus first spoke these words had plenty to be anxious about. We're told that most of them had been driven from their meager subsistence farms by high taxes and unscrupulous loan sharks. According to our colleague, Doug Oakman, they were literally living hand to mouth. Jesus' prayer to "forgive us our debts" was not a metaphor for them. Nor was the cry for bread enough for them and their families to survive for just one more day. If anyone had cause to worry and be anxious, they certainly did.

Yet in the face of their desperate situation, Jesus reminds them again and again of God's high regard for them ("Blessed are you poor!" says Jesus in Luke's version) and urges them to share what little they have and above all, not to be anxious. "What I'm trying to do here," says Jesus (in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase), "is to get you to *relax*, to not be so preoccupied with *getting*, so you can respond to God's *giving*."

It's certainly not the prosperity gospel Jesus is talking about here; at least not as its widely preached and practiced in many churches throughout the world today. There's no promise that if you have enough faith, you'll soon be wealthy, and your troubles will magically vanish. Most, if not all of his listeners undoubtedly found themselves in the same desperate outward circumstances after he spoke these words to them as before.

Yet we're told that in their encounter with Jesus, something changed for them. Somehow, in some strange way,

- The world turned.
- Things looked different than they did before.
- They had a longer view of God's intentions for them and for all creation.

What Jesus showed them when he described what he called the "reign of God" changed their lives.

The promise of this gospel is that it can also change ours. In the face of all that there is to be anxious about, like those Galileans listening to Jesus on the mountaintop or wherever he met them, we are invited by Jesus to take heart and rediscover hope as he addresses us in the words of this gospel.

I don't know about you, but as I consider the state of our world and the state of creation, unable to escape daily bombardment by the latest outrages of our bullying, bombastic twitterer-in-chief, my anxiety increases and hope all but vanishes. The bastards are in charge of the world once more, just as they always seem to be.

My inspiration at times like these is to look to heroes and heroines who have faced discouraging and daunting circumstance and yet have somehow managed to maintain not only a sense of hope but a sense of decency and even a sense of humor – Dietrich

Bonhoeffer in a Nazi prison and Nelson Mandela on Robben Island, Martin Luther King, Jr. in Birmingham Jail abandoned by his fellow clergy, Mother Theresa among the poorest of the poor in the slums of Calcutta, or my lesbian, gay, and transgender sisters and brothers waiting for the church to finally wake up and acknowledge their gifts for ministry.

One of my standbys is the Czech poet and playwright, Vaclav Havel, who challenged the communist regime in his country and was rewarded for his efforts with several lengthy prison terms. Havel spent his life trying to work and lead in difficult and anxious times. He was a poet who also served as the first president of Czechoslovakia and then the new Czech Republic after the fall of communism. In an interview prior to the fall of the Soviet Union, during the dark days of the 1980s, he was asked by an interviewer, “Do you see a *grain of hope* anywhere?” Havel, a thoughtful but avowedly non-religious person, responded this way:

I should say that the kind of hope I often think about (especially in situations that are particularly hopeless, such as prison) I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation.

Hope in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, an ability to work for something *because it is good*, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. In short, I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works, and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, *from “elsewhere.”* It is also this hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live and continually try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do here and now.<sup>1</sup>

So, we too come together in rooms like this one as the Spirit gathers us and changes us from a group of anxious individuals into a conspiracy of grace whose hope also comes *from “elsewhere.”* We hear words from Jesus and we pray—for ourselves and our loved ones, for the congregations and people that we serve, for our leaders and the suffering world, and for creation, loudly groaning in pain and travail awaiting its deliverance.

To all outward appearances, there isn't much that happens here to address our anxiety or provide us with a “grain of hope” — a splash of water, words from an old book, an embrace from someone we may or may not know very well or even like, a taste of bread and wine that we are bold enough—or crazy enough—to believe is a foretaste of a feast to come, a

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<sup>1</sup> Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvizdala*, translated by Paul Wilson, Vintage Books, 1991. pp. 181-2

humble *hors d'oeuvre* anticipating the great banquet of the lamb when there will be no more sorrow or tears, no more anxiety or hopelessness, and God will be, in Paul's words, "everything to everyone" even as God has been from the very beginning.

As we move back into the world, we remember Jesus' words, "Don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." Hope is rekindled in our hearts and it is also enough for today. Amen

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