

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 5/25/08
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: Matthew 6:24-34

When I begin working with someone in a spiritual direction relationship, I always ask why he or she is considering spiritual direction at this particular time. Very often people tell me that they want to explore and understand what God wants them to do with their lives. They find themselves feeling restless or experiencing a sense of longing. Their immediate circumstances might have changed, or they've entered a new season in their lives. "What might God's will for me be at this particular time and in this particular place?" they want to know.

To set the record straight, I tell them that I actually don't believe that God has a will for our lives if what we're talking about is a unique plan that's been pre-arranged and set apart by God, for both the fulfillment of God's ultimate purposes and the specific destiny of any one person. It seems to me that God has given each of us a wide range of gifts, passions, and opportunities for ministry, and that at any particular time, we could very well be living out "God's will for our life" in countless, very different ways. How to live out our calling as Christians is surely valid and meaningful to explore. But the answer to the question, "What does God want me to do with my life?" can always be answered, "To live faithfully," no matter when in our lives that question is asked, or in what contexts.

How, then, do we live faithfully? As Christians, we have the life of Jesus to consider as we wrestle with this question. We believe that in Jesus, we can see what a human life truly attuned to God and faithfully lived out looks like. Our best and most reliable compass is what Jesus said and did. And Jesus' words in today's Gospel text highlight one aspect of how we are to live faithfully.

According to Matthew, Jesus taught that his followers should not worry - about what they eat, or what they drink, or what they wear. They're to trust in God's provision, because just as God takes care of the birds and the wildflowers, God will take care of them. And if the kingdom of God is what first engages the attention of the people of God, then their other needs will be met.

Some of those who have heard or read these words of Jesus have been truly needy, legitimately concerned about the absolute basics of their survival. That's not our situation. Thankfully, we have more than enough to eat and are adequately clothed. In our world of increasing complexity, breakneck pace, and excessive materialism, it may be hard for us to draw a connection between the things that keep us awake at night and Jesus' examples of the birds and the wildflowers. How, then, might this passage be relevant for us as we seek to live faithfully?

The key word here seems to be "worry." Jesus uses it four times in just these few sentences. What is it that Jesus means when he says to his followers, "Do not worry?" Jesus seems to be cautioning his listeners not to engage in the fretful anxiety that sucks

the joy out of life. The Greek word that is used here for “worry” is the same one found in the Mary and Martha narrative to describe Martha’s anxious distraction with household tasks that prevents her from stopping her frenetic activity for a few moments to sit with and listen to Jesus.

Given what we know of Jesus’ words and actions in other texts in the Gospels, we understand that in this passage, Jesus is not advocating carelessness in relation to day-to-day concerns. He’s not condemning thoughtful, responsible attention to the things that people have to do to provide for themselves and their families. What Jesus seems to be focusing on is a human tendency to base our security on those things over which we have some control. The desire and the need to be in control seems to be what takes us from the realm of healthy attention to the fabric of our life into that place of inner tumult known as anxiety and worry. Stewing about things is the manifestation of the assumption that I can and must do something. And if I believe that it is ultimately up to me to do something, I must not be confident that God can or will.

It might be helpful for us to think in terms of living in control versus living in relationship. If I’m living my life in control, then it’s my responsibility to orchestrate every scenario to fit my expectations of what’s best. It’s up to me to make the schedule work, to make sure that the people around me are happy, healthy, and living up to their full potential. It’s up to me to get it all done, and to get it done right; to look like I know what I’m doing and to sound like I know what I’m talking about. If something doesn’t work, it’s my fault. And in this mind-set of a need to control, the results say everything about who I am as a person. If it doesn’t work, I’m a failure. How could carrying such a burden not throw us into deep anxiety?

Another option is living in relationship, with God and with others. That looks and feels quite different. There’s openness to the rhythm of life that makes the specific ups and downs less jarring and disruptive. If we believe that God is the creator, the redeemer, and the sustainer of life – of all of life, including each of our individual lives and the lives of those around us – then it’s not up to us to create, redeem, or sustain. It’s not up to us to know everything, to do everything, and to do everything right. If we can let go of the misconception that the process and the outcome are in our hands, then the interruption in a jam-packed schedule, the unforeseen obstacle in a project, or the less than mature decision made by a loved one moves from being something that we must immediately and decisively fix to an opportunity for us to stop, acknowledge God’s presence even in this most challenging circumstance, and seek to discern and join the movement of God’s Spirit in this situation.

A new member of a 12-step group reported, “It is exhausting to try to be God!” This is a tremendously freeing realization. It releases us from the realm of control into the realm of relationship; from overwhelming responsibility to genuine anticipation and attentive involvement.

God has given us the gift of life. It makes sense that as we seek relationship with God, who has given us life, all that we need for our journey will be given to us. It may be that

what we think we need and what actually unfolds in our life with God are not exactly the same, and that may be hard for us to come to terms with. But God's intention for faithful living, as witnessed in the life and teaching of Jesus, could not be clearer. If relationship with God is what we set our heart on, everything that we need will flow from that.

When I think about being in control, I imagine holding onto something tightly, like a steering wheel when I'm driving too fast. When I imagine myself in relationship, my hands open – to respond, to touch, to comfort, to receive. It's so much easier to receive and to give when I'm not clutching or grasping.

May we be people who live faithfully - in relationship rather than in control. May we intentionally and confidently put our trust in God's love and provision for us – the God who creates, redeems, and sustains all of life. May our hands be open to receive and to respond. Amen.