

Go Pray

So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.

Today's trouble is enough for today. (Matt 6:34)

I've always liked the poetry of the King James translation of that verse, where it says: "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." That has a nice rolling rhythm. But certainly translation that we just read is easier to understand: "Today's trouble is enough for today."

(Music: "Don't Worry, Be Happy")

I love that song and that sentiment. And yet...sometimes it just isn't enough. When you're worried (about, say, organizing the Harry Potter festival), and when someone (say, your loving husband) tells you not to worry -- well, sometimes, that just doesn't help. It isn't enough. And the Bible isn't always reassuring here either. The passage from Matthew that we just read says, "tomorrow will bring worries of its own." That's not a particularly comforting thought. It says, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" Oh, thanks for that: just what I needed in the middle of the night, a reminder of the hopefully distant but undeniably approaching hour of my death. And in Chapter 10 of Matthew, Jesus says:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Matt 10:29-32)

But in the dark night I don't find comfort in this. God may watch the sparrow fall to the ground, but God doesn't prevent it. And someday I too will fall, and God won't prevent that either.

And in the dark night come the nightmares that separate us from God. There is the nightmare of worry. What if I lose my job? Or -- heaven forbid -- what if I lose my mind, quit my job, and enter a seminary? What if I get sick? What about my children? What about my aging parents? What if I can't do what I promised? What if the thing I'm dreading actually happens? And don't tell me not to worry -- I've lived long enough to know that every now and then, the things I dread actually do happen. In the nightmare of worrying, as if in a sick fever, I can't stop thinking about the things I dread.

And then there's the nightmare of anger. How could people treat me like that? How could God treat me like that? In the nightmare of anger I rehearse the thing that made me angry, replaying it over and over, each time feeling more aggrieved, each time with an anger that is more and more powerful. Anger is seductive, because it makes me feel powerful. But it is a sick power, a power that consumes its host. It's like the power that comes from taking amphetamines: a boost of energy that saps my health and hollows me out.

And there's the nightmare of money. It starts with the ordinary worry about having enough money, but it can become an obsession that continues under its own power, whether I have enough at the moment or not. Did I invest in the right things? What if there's a crash? What if there isn't? And there's the temptation of real-time quotes: how are my investments doing now -- and now -- and how about now? "You cannot serve God and wealth," says today's Gospel reading, and I know from my own experience that this is true. The nightmare of obsession with money, like the other nightmares, saps my God-given vitality and leaves me, wraith-like, cold and naked in the dark on the other side. As Wordsworth wrote:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

How can we awaken from these nightmares? How can we feel God's presence again?
Well, allow me to demonstrate.

(Distribution of fudge.)

This is my fudge. Sugar, corn syrup, milk, butter, vanilla, salt – and, of course, chocolate. If you can eat and enjoy fudge, please take one and hold it at the ready, but don't eat it yet. If you can't eat it or wouldn't enjoy it -- God bless you! -- please put your hand on the shoulder of someone who can, and prepare to enjoy it vicariously.

Everybody ready? We start by framing it as a prayer:

Dear Spirit, we know you are everywhere: every bush is your burning bush, every mountain is your holy mountain, every person is your beloved child, and every piece of food is filled with your light. Thank you for the fudge we are about to share. And if there is any hungry person on the road, help that person to find us so that we can share with him or her, as you share with us.

Now eat.

And all the people say: Amen!

That's it, really. That's the whole secret to waking from the nightmare. That's the whole secret to "Don't Worry, Be Happy." I don't mean the fudge (though of course one shouldn't underestimate the power of chocolate) -- I mean the prayer. The nightmares of worry, of anger, of obsession, are what separate us from God, and prayer is what reconnects us to God. One of us wrote this question for the wall of questions we had before Pentecost: "Help make God real and meaningful in everyday life." This is the only way I know to do that: go pray in everyday life.

If you would consent to receive one commandment from me, it would be this: go pray! I know you're already doing it in church, but I mean after church, all the rest of the week, every day: go pray! If you have a prayer-book you love to use, or if you have traditional prayers you love to say, by all means keep loving them. But if not, don't worry: you don't need any official words to say. I am firmly convinced that every act can be prayer, and that the best authorities on the right way for you to pray are the parties involved: namely, yourself, and God.

As we've just experienced, the act of eating can be a prayer. We committed it to God first, and we engaged in it with prayerful intent, so that the physical act of putting food in our mouths became a spiritual act as well. And it's a blessing to be able to do it together, but there's also a blessing in doing it alone. Any act so framed with prayer, becomes prayer.

So go pray! If you cook, make that an act of prayer. Try a little spoken blessing beforehand, and then cook as if the food you're making is meant for God's own table -- as of course it is. If you work with wood; if you tend someone who is sick; if you garden; if you write, or paint, or dance, or clean, or drive the kids to school, make it a prayer. You might find it awkward at first; you might be in the habit of thinking that prayer is something far removed from everyday life, something that only specially-ordained people do, using specially-pious words, in specially-blessed places, on a specially-designated day of the week. But just give it a try. Do it silently, if you like, but do it. Nothing is too mundane to pray with. After all, our religious tradition is incarnational; we understand God as being incarnate, Immanuel, God-with-us, involved with the messy details of life. So pray for your computer each time you turn it on, for its mouse and each of its little keys. Pray for each letter you put in the mailbox, even if you're just paying a bill. Make up a prayer for answering the phone -- perhaps a prayer that you may meet Christ in the caller -- and say it every time you pick up the phone. (Well, I mean, every time *before* you pick up the phone. Though you might try praying into the

phone right after you pick it up. It would probably reduce the number of telemarketers you have to talk to: “Webber’s residence! If you have that of God in you, and are ready to share it with me, please press 1 now.”)

The Celtic tradition of Christianity is a great stronghold of everyday prayer. If you feel embarrassed about praying for your mouse and keyboard, the Celtic tradition is a good place to look for support. In the late 1800s, in the rural, Gaelic-speaking regions of Scotland, a folklorist named Alexander Carmichael went about collecting the prayers, hymns, charms, incantations, and blessings used by the people in their daily lives. He made them into six volumes, with translations into English, and they make fascinating reading. To these country people, prayer was not something you did in church; it was something you did all the time. There were prayers for rising and for going to bed; for smoozing the fire at night, and for reawakening the fire in the morning; for planting and for harvesting; for milking and churning and spinning and weaving; for the first sight of the sun in the morning and the first sight of the moon at night. These were traditional folk prayers, short little poems of prayer, not taught in church but passed on from parents to children. They had a prayer for just about every imaginable mundane occasion. Any morsel they ate might be like a communion, and any handful of water they washed with might be like a baptism. I don’t want to romanticize their life: they endured more hardships than most of us do today. But I’m thinking that they were less prone than we are to the nightmares that separate us from God.

This folklorist, Alexander Carmichael, interviewed an old woman named Catharine MacLennan. She remembered how, when she was a little girl, her own mother had taught her to pray. This is what she told him:

My mother would be asking us to sing our morning song to God down in the back-house, as Mary's lark was singing it up in the clouds, and as Christ's mavis was singing it yonder in the tree, giving glory to the God of the creatures for the repose of the night, for the light of the day, and for the joy of life. She would tell

us that every creature on earth here below and in the ocean beneath and in the air above was giving glory to the great God of the creatures and the worlds, of the virtues and the blessings, and would we be dumb! My dear mother.... My heart loves the earth in which my beloved mother rests. (*Carmina Gadelica*, vol. III, p. 25)

Our Gospel reading today tells us, "Today's trouble is enough for today." What makes that more than an old hit song or a Hallmark-card sentiment is that it is backed up by the power of God's actual presence. Within this world and behind it, during this world and after it, God's arms are there to embrace us. Sometimes our nightmares, our worries and angers and obsessions, separate us from God, and we can't feel God's embrace; but God's embrace is always there. If you want to feel it, go pray.

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