

A Place Beyond Worry

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, February 27, 2011: The Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany.
Based on Matthew 6:24-34.*

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you-- you of little faith? Therefore do not worry . . ."

In 2002, when Ground Zero was still smoldering, and some New Yorkers were asking whether it was time to quit this city and its terrorist targets, I read a compelling story of a few people who decided not to quit.

It wasn't actually a New York story, but I think you'll see why I'm recalling it now. The stimulus is the release this week of a movie, *Of Gods and Men*.

The movie's story concerns a small community of seven French Cistercian Trappist monks. Their life revolves around a monastery built by their order in the 19th century in a small village in Algeria's Atlas Mountains, the range that separates the populated coastal plain from the interior Sahara desert.

Algeria was then ravaged by a civil war fueled by deep anger at the annulling of the 1992 elections. The government was opposed by a rising Islamist insurgency, and everyday terror included large scale massacres and beheadings—and eventually a drive to rid Algeria of foreigners and infidels.

That sets up the pressure on these monks, obviously Christian and obviously French, to leave. But something very deep keeps them in place: a commitment to live the teachings of the Gospel by friendship and service rather than literally violating the law against preaching their foreign faith.

The monks were intelligent, lived simply, and performed daily works of justice and mercy. They employed their Muslim neighbors in their gardens and maintained a clinic that offered basic medical care to anyone who needed it. The villagers in turn honored the monks' piety and practice and regularly invited these Christian neighbors to their weddings and other festivities.

In other words, they were too invested in the life of the place where they lived to leave it, and their investment was rooted in what they believed. In the story, and I gather in the movie, there is a soul-wrenching debate among the monks when the local civil and military authorities urge them to leave as things deteriorate and they become targets.

It's 2011 now, and in September we'll mark ten years since terror invaded our lives. I remember a lot of piety on the Sunday after 9/11 when we had probably the largest attendance ever outside Christmas or Easter. I remember promises made to myself, and many I heard from so many of you, to rethink what was truly important in life.

The attendance faded immediately. The rethinking? Well, I know some of it went on. And I choose to believe that most of you struggle with that underlying thinking. If you do, good for you. Keep it up.

Our job here is to give you the stuff for that work of rethinking. In our faith and practice we need to remember that deciding where one should live, and how one should love based on that decision, and what one draws upon to make that decision takes us to the core of our existence.

Our questions are the monks' questions:

Is this the place I'm meant to be, whatever the dangers?

And if so, how do I live? What gets me up every morning, and what keeps me going? What are the core beliefs that make life worth living?

In stark terms, you get up every day and you're hungry and naked. You need food and clothing. You need to make a living. On these daily anxieties, you might say New Yorkers have built this wonderful rat race of a city. Ten years ago, we mourned but we also looked around and said, No one is going to take this away from us. We will rebuild.

And we we did.

But the hurts and the anger don't go away easily.

The radical notion of Jesus in the sermon on the mount, which we look at again today for the fifth Sunday in a row, is that love is the cause and love is the answer.

We were created in love, for love: *love God, love your neighbor*. And more: *love your enemies*.

Why don't we just do it?

Because we're anxious. Anxious about what we'll eat and what we'll wear. Anxiety makes us do things, take things from others, become addicted to being on top, winning all the time, keeping what's ours. Anxiety makes us retreat in what we know, limited as it is, instead of becoming curious—honestly and restlessly and cosmically curious—about what's right, about what it's all about.

If we could just consider the birds of the air, how God feeds them; or the lilies of the field, how God clothes them. *Do you think by worrying you can add a single hour to your span of life?*

Jesus says plainly: God knows you need all these things. And then adds a holy twist: the way to get them is to strive for something else—for love, for the kingdom of God, for that day when things will settle down, be put right, be healed.

John Kiser, who wrote the story of the monks, in his 2002 book *The Monks of Tibhirine*, was drawn to the story the way we should be drawn to these questions.

"The monks were not really 'French,' he wrote in the forward. "To my mind, their country was that of the Gospels. They belonged to everyone, even Americans and Muslims. These men represented my understanding of what Christianity should be. Love God, but love thy neighbor first. The problem is always the neighbor. Theirs was a respectful love that accepted that God speaks to people in different ways. They were practicing their faith without ulterior motives in a Muslim country where spreading the Good News is not permitted.

"I also wanted to understand better what it means to be 'Christian.' Does being baptized make one a Christian? Does professing love of Jesus make one a Christian? To lead a Christian life, does one have to be Christian? And why have Christians all too often been bad advertisements for Christianity—dividing and excluding, rather than uniting people—just as certain so-called Muslims are now doing in Algeria.' Is the problem with scripture or with people?"

Good questions: Where is the problem? And where do you go to work on it?

Here, for one place, where challenging teaching from one who lived that teaching is stubbornly presented week by week.

And you go to your own life, to the beginning of each new day, when those anxieties settle and you set out at a full run to overcome them.

I believe in a God who created us out of love and will love those who stop once in a while to ask what it's all about.

I believe in a God who loves you enough to get under your skin, to work through your very anxieties to bring you to that place where "today's own trouble is enough for today."

And I believe it will help you get to that place beyond worry, where, step by small step, you can begin to love and serve, dangers and anxieties included, and know that this is what's meant by real life, and real love. *Amen*.

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