

On not giving in

A sermon by the Rev. Robert B. Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Second Sunday after Pentecost, May 25, 2008.

Jesus said, "I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink or what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?" Matthew 6:25

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is telling us not to worry about our lives, what we will eat or what we will drink or wear and that life is more than food or clothing. Since it is part of Christian compassion to care for those who are homeless and hungry, I've often thought about why Jesus seems to be denying the importance of having the most basic necessities. What he is teaching us is that the more we learn to live simply and prudently, the greater our chances for happiness and contentment. If we are not content with what we have, if we are worrying that what we don't have or what may be taken away, we are succumbing to anxiety.

We have all known those who are not happy unless they can find something about which to complain or worry about what might happen. If all seems to be going well, they seem disappointed and may even thwart it so that they can complain that everything happens to them. For the chronically negative, life as just one thing after another who expect the worst in every situation and are disappointed if the worst doesn't happen. Their constant negativity energizes them while it drains the energy out of everyone else.

Jesus is saying is that we must not give in to fear that takes away our confidence and blurs our vision, rendering us unable to manage the simplest tasks. It is important to separate fact from fiction, to know the difference between a real crisis and imagined trouble brought on by worry.

Nothing so troubles our minds, distresses our soul and confuses our judgment as worry and anxiety. It dominates the lives of those who have no trust in themselves or in God. Worrying about imagined possibilities and expecting things to go wrong not only adds to our anxiety, but it compounds the probability of bringing on a real crisis. It was Mark Twain who said that he had known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened.

When you feel yourself giving into anxiety, do not let yourself become the victim. God never abandons you, even in the midst of real trouble and adversity. God is there to support you through the worst of times. Take charge of your life by refusing to let yourself be dominated by the forces of anxiety and fear and focus on driving out the fear and worry. Let God's grace surround you on every side. If you find yourself perplexed about things you don't understand, use your powers of reasoning to see beyond the present moment and trust that you can handle whatever comes along. By doing this, there is no room for worry and anxiety. Learn to live one day at a time and not try to anticipate what may or may not happen. You can't change yesterday and you can't do anything about tomorrow, but you can do something about today. Those in the A.A. program have that wonderful prayer about changing the things you can, accepting the things you can't change and the wisdom to know the difference. It is amazing how much better things seem in the morning that you worried about the night before. Worry causes us to put off that which we fear and procrastination is nothing more than the art of trying to keep up with yesterday.

I have often found that when I think I am going through a rough time, there is always someone worse off. When I visit someone in the hospital or in a nursing home and realize that I can walk out of there and they can't, I forget why I was so anxious.

There are some things you can do when you feel yourself giving into anxiety and worry. First, talk to someone, anyone who is willing to listen. They may or may not have a solution and it may be that you just need to talk it through. There is an important difference between talking through a problem and just plain whining. Don't dismiss ideas or suggestions just because you've tried them or because you haven't thought of them.

Secondly, review the facts to make sure you understand the situation about which you are concerned. Understanding the scope of the situation gives you a greater sense of control, leaving less room for worry and anxiety.

Third, make an action plan for what you can do about the situation. Find out what you can do and what you can't do and go from there. You may very well discover that there is more that can be done than you thought, thus giving you more control over the situation. Worry loves a victim and it is essential not to let yourself be victimized by your life circumstances. The people who get on in this world are those who determine the circumstances they want and are better able to live with them because they chose them.

When I think of the writer John Milton going blind, when I think of the composer Ludwig Beethoven going deaf, or the artist August Renoir having severe arthritis in his hands, I am inspired by how each dealt with his disabilities in his own way. Milton could still dictate his ideas, Beethoven got down with his head on the floor to feel the vibrations of his orchestral works and Renoir had his paint brush tied to his hands so that he could continue painting. Each of them stayed focused on how they could continue to pursue their passions. They would not give in to self-pity and hopelessness.

Look back over your own spiritual journey this far and realize the times when you were able to bear what seemed unbearable and remember that worrying about those times didn't add anything to your ability to withstand difficulty. Worry is not only useless, it poisons the soul, strains the heart and renders us unable to draw on our emotional and spiritual strengths. Appreciating what you have and not being resentful for what you don't have is to attain a true sense of personal integrity and contentment. And that is what God wants for us.