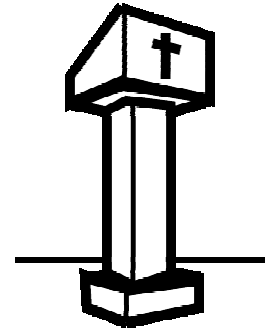


**Sermon Synopsis**  
**The Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**Preached by Fr. Peter Champion**



On a beautiful early fall day last year, Susan and I were enjoying a warm, sunny day off in our back garden. The scent of the roses and lavender was sweet, the sound of the fountain was soothing, and the hummingbirds were at our feeder. As I sat at our patio table relaxing, I experienced my first anxiety attack.

It was a classic anxiety attack--heart beating hard and fast in my chest, mind racing; chest tight. My body trembled as if I'd had too much caffeine. I knew enough to be able to name what was happening to me. I could even turn to Susan and say, "I'm having an anxiety attack." But knowing what it was and being able to articulate what was going on didn't alleviate the symptoms. I tried some deep yoga breathing which almost always helps when I'm having trouble falling asleep. Again, not much help. Finally, I realized I'd just have to trust the feelings would subside and ride them out. And in 15 or 20 minutes, the feelings did subside.

All of us know what it feels like to be anxious. Jesus nailed some of the most basic things we can be anxious about—food, clothing, health. When we worry about having enough food to eat, shelter for our families, adequate clothing or health concerns, it can be pretty difficult to focus our attention on other things. And of course there are many other causes of anxiety in our world today--the busy pace of life, turmoil in our country nation and the world, the budget crisis in our state and the impact on education and other essential services. And even positive events can cause anxiety. Think of Bridezilla—so intent on having the perfect wedding that she misses the joy of the day. I can remember awaiting the arrival of our first child with a mixture of sheer joy and real anxiety about whether or not we were up to the task. Starting a new job can be very exciting, but I've never been able to begin a new job or call without wondering if this time I haven't gotten in over my head. And a longed for retirement can generate anxiety about what to do with all the time and energy stretching out before you.

My memory of my anxiety attack was the entry point into Jesus' words in our reading from the Sermon on the Mount. **"Do not worry about your life..." "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" "And why do you worry about clothing?" "Therefore, do not worry..."** What do we make of these words, and how do we live into their spirit? Several thoughts...

First, I happen to believe that worrying—being anxious—is a profoundly human thing to do. The fact that we are hardwired to experience anxiety is testament to the reality that anxiety is a survival mechanism that has allowed us to survive as a species. There are plenty of things about which it is perfectly normal to be anxious. Jesus admits as much in the last verse of our Gospel, **"So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."**

Second, telling people not to be anxious—not to worry—rarely seems to work. As scripture scholar Greg Carey wrote, *“Telling people not to be anxious is like telling them not to think of an elephant. Maybe elephants have not crossed their mind in weeks, but the suggestion itself provokes elephant on the brain.”*

If you tell me not to worry, it usually comes across to me as a criticism of what feels very real and important to me. Is that what Jesus is doing? Is he nagging us for worrying too much?

While some of the reading this morning might sound like it, I don’t think that is ultimately what Jesus is trying to teach people.

Looking back at my own anxiety attack, I am not surprised by it. At the time, I’d just returned from a visit to my mom and stepdad and was feeling anxious about their health and safety; I was also feeling overwhelmed by the tasks that lay ahead of me in that area. I was preparing to lead my first anti-racism workshop since being certified as a trainer and was buried in the preparations. Our gala fundraiser was 3 weeks away. Our finances at St. John’s looked desperate and our request for relief from the diocese was stalled. As if that weren’t enough, my beloved Dodgers ended a dismal season of baseball, which I took very hard. Had Jesus appeared to me and told me not to worry, I’m afraid I might have slugged him.

All of this was bad enough, but what was the tipping point was that I was trying to carry the whole load by myself. You remember the saying “Let Go and Let God?” Not me, not then. I was engaged in a tug-of-war with God, and my knuckles were white from trying not to let go.

It is this kind of clinging, desperate anxiety that I believe Jesus was inviting us to avoid. It isn’t all yours to carry, Jesus said. You don’t have to deal with it alone. You have God—your Heavenly Father—who knows what you’re going through and wants to help. God knows what you need, even if that doesn’t seem apparent.

At bottom, Jesus is inviting us to trust that God is on our side. I know that I was having a hard time trusting God last fall because I was so anxious that I could hardly pray about it. When we can’t, or won’t, trust God enough to share in prayer what is going on in our lives, we’re in trouble. Our metaphoric hands are so full of all the stuff we’re hoarding to ourselves that we can’t receive the good gifts God wants to give us.

I’m not saying that turning things over to God and sitting on our butts is the answer. Trusting God is not the same as abdicating responsibility for doing our part. In May case, I had to let go of some of what I was carrying by delegating to others. And I had to recognize that some of what I was anxious about was beyond my control. Finally, I had to check in with my clergy support group and my therapist so I could unpack what it was within me that was keeping me from letting go and trusting God and others.

I don’t know what anxiety you may be carrying now, but I doubt that there is a single one of us who could honestly tell me that they have no worries, no anxieties. Don’t hang on to your anxieties like I did; trust God to help you with them. Look at your prayer life to see whether you’re trusting God or keeping it all inside. And by all means, avail yourself of the supporting family, friends, colleagues and even professionals. These folks are God’s gifts to us.

I can share from my own experience that when am able to make feeble steps towards the kind of lifestyle Jesus describes in our Gospel, God works wonders in my life. I’m

not perfect—God still has a lot of work to do on me. But God is a persistent worker, and my life is better for what God is doing.

I am convinced that we have been entrusted with opportunity to not only experience this healing and growth, but to share it with others as well. In a world filled with anxiety and worry, we hold a precious gift that we can share with others.

All these things will be given to you as well. What a promise. My we learn to trust and receive.