

A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany, an Episcopal Church in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on Sunday, 27 February 2011, for the 8th Sunday after the Epiphany, based upon the sixth chapter of St. Matthew.

During the summer before I went to seminary my parish church was a central place for friendship and socializing. That was the summer I made friends with Pamela, and her husband, David. They were living in Kalamazoo for a few months because Pamela was there as a traveling Physical Therapist, working at the local hospital. She and her husband would decide on a place in the world they wanted to visit, and then Pamela would find a position as a PT. After a few months of travel, they'd return home to Christchurch, New Zealand, then set out again to some other place in Africa, or Europe, or wherever. News from them this week is that their house in Christchurch is condemned; they're living with a daughter in Auckland. Jesus says, "don't worry about your life."

I wonder what he'd say to Pamela & David, and the countless others affected by the earthquake.

The United Nations security council is moving forward with resolutions against Libya's brutal treatment of those who are protesting the government there. Our own embassy shut down operations on Friday. Jesus says, "don't worry about your life." I wonder what he's saying to the people of Libya.

When Jesus asked, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" he was raising a profound issue. I don't think he intended his comments to discount or minimize the anxiety the people of New Zealand and Libya feel right now, but how do his questions and comments about worrying and anxiety apply to our lives?

Many of us worry excessively. We do our best to squeeze every minute of the time we have; to pack it all in, to do it all, and his suggestion was that at heart that's a symptom of a spiritual problem, a spiritual sickness, if you will. "Do not worry about your life," he said, . . . what you will eat, or drink or wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds, the lilies of the field . . . God knows what you need. Stop worrying."

Yet I think to be human is to worry. Soren Kierkegaard wrote a century ago about the human condition as, "Fear and Trembling." Alone in creation, apparently, human beings worry. Alone in creation, apparently, human beings know about the limits of our own lives, our finiteness.

And so we worry—a lot—and we do what we can to resolve our worries, and secure our futures against whatever terrible things might happen. And it's precisely at that point that Jesus catches us with an admonition that sounds at once profound and silly—"Don't worry. God will give you what you need."

We do worry. We worry about what we look like, about our security, about our loved ones. And insofar as we worry, we are inclined to give our anxieties the power to shape and form the way we live. And that's called idolatry: giving someone or something other than God the power and authority to shape and form our lives. And this particular idolatry can be harmful to our relationships and our

spiritual, mental and physical health.

Over a decade ago Barbara Brown Taylor, one of our church's brightest preaching lights, announced on the occasion of her 50th birthday that she was declaring a jubilee and accepting no more outside responsibilities. Here's what she wrote:

"I do not mean to make an idol of health, but it does seem to me that at least some of us have made an idol of exhaustion. The only time when we have done enough is when we are running on empty and when the ones we love most are the ones we see least. When we lie down to sleep at night, we offer our full appointment calendars to God in lieu of prayer, believing that God, who is as busy as we are, will surely understand." (The Christian Century, 11/3/99)

"Do not worry about your life," Jesus said. He was speaking to his disciples and to us, and he was teaching a fundamental lesson about life; that is—that nothing ultimately can save us but God's love: nothing—not our busy schedules, good deeds, full bank account, will secure and protect us, and ultimately give us peace and a sense of wholeness. The only thing that can do that for us is the knowledge that we are loved unconditionally, without reservation, with a love that is more powerful, more real, than anything in the world; a love that bears all things believes all things, hopes all things, a love that stands when all else has fallen. He was inviting them to trust that love—to trust him.

He is the gift! And if we miss that--his justice-seeking and love-extending embrace--we can miss our own life, its glory and beauty and passion. Accepting Christ as the gift, and life as gift, becomes an avenue for worrying less and living more.

A gift, neither earned nor deserved—at the end of a demanding day, in an arduous week full of stress, Tchaikovsky's 5th Symphony and the passionately beautiful French Horn solo in the second movement—a gift. The touch of your beloved's hand; a grandchild's squeal of delight; a bite of good, homemade bread, the blessing of sleep at the end of the day; all gifts unearned, undeserved.

For the people of New Zealand, the promise of rebuilding; for the people of Libya, the hope of a new way to live. For us, the reality of Christ's wisdom given in a weekly banquet where he himself is host and food.

Do not worry about your life—what you will eat or drink or wear . . . strive first for the Kingdom of God and all these things will be given to you as well.