

Eighth Sunday 2014

Isaiah 49: 14-15; Matthew 6: 24-34

Jesus' words about the birds of the air and lilies of the field have beautiful simplicity but are awfully hard to put into practice. I feel uniquely qualified to speak about them. Some years ago, during a rough patch, psychological testing concluded I had chronic anxiety syndrome. That sounds bad and would be maybe embarrassing, if many of us did not "have" something. The syndrome explained so many things. It explains why I find this section of the sermon on the mount so unsympathetic and impractical. To say, "don't worry," is like saying don't pick the scab when the knee itches underneath. We know it won't help, the knee will take longer to heal, but we pick the scab anyway. So it is with worry: it won't help the situation, it won't do the worrier any good, but we worry anyway. Such a potent and universal experience is worth exploring.

When I was nine, my mother needed a thyroid operation. I was sure I knew what that meant. Anxiety is a possibility that becomes a certainty: what might go wrong will go wrong. The hospital only allowed visitors over age twelve. I imagined what was happening inside. But there were deeper feelings. My father was too busy with work to do the cooking. So he bought some take-out chicken, which would normally have been a treat. He came home and warmed it up. The oven made it charred and dry. I didn't complain; he was doing his best. I did not even think of the bad cooking we might have if my mother did not get well. I choked it down, looking at my mother's empty chair, and I guess my father was doing the same. In anxiety you feel isolated, even if someone at the table has the same feeling. The grief is private.

But it has light moments. At age twenty-five, I was about to be ordained to the Protestant ministry (this is pre-history). I was already staying in the parsonage. Across the fields was the white steeple under which the ordination was to be held. The night before I lay in bed with great excitement. I had prepared carefully. Many friends and well-wishers would be there. Then I thought (a dangerous thing to do), this will be a large crowd for an old building. The worship-space is on the second floor. It would not take a Samson pushing pillars on the lower level to make the upstairs floor collapse. Think of all those people! Think of the vibration the organ and singing would make! What if a mighty wind came through the windows while we sat there? Death,

destruction, disaster: who could sleep with such a possibility ahead? It sounds ridiculous in daylight. But I have found that logical argument seldom convinces the worrier.

Last example: my mother again. (If this is too much mother-material blame the first reading.) She was not a worrier. This became evident in my teenage years. When my friends were given curfews and warnings, I had none. There were no extra rules; there were hardly any to begin with. My mother believed that if a child felt secure and happy in the first five years, the next twenty would take care of themselves. When I went out for the evening, she went to bed and went to sleep; she did not wait up. When I got in, I let her know; she did not seem to notice the clock.

This changed somewhat in old age. My parents were still living independently; my mother was ninety-two. I was visiting from the abbey. I went to see a friend several hours away. I said I would be back the next day for supper. Supper in my parents' house had been at 5:00 for fifty years. There were highway repairs that made the traffic crawl; I had no cellphone. I arrived at 5:20. The kind-hearted busybody from next door was with my mother in the kitchen, not exactly holding her hand, but joking to keep her spirits up. There was not a word of reproof; there never was. It was the look of fear and struggle on my mother's face that cut me to the heart. Sometimes your loved one's anxiety is harder to bear than your own.

I share these stories not to negate the example of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. But I do want to qualify a bit. Anxiety and faith are often set in opposition, as polar antagonists. If you have faith, you won't have anxiety; if you doubt, you cannot believe. I am not so sure about either of these truisms. I suspect that belief and doubt coexist in the subterranean soup of our souls. As waves ebb and flow, so, at various times, anxiety or faith, doubt or certainty, rises to the surface of our awareness. In the heart or head, or wherever the emotional center is, there exists, in everyone, both anxiety and trust, the hope for a good outcome and fear about a painful one. You cannot weigh up these quantities to get a healthy quotient--it's not like measuring your cholesterol level. You can't determine, I have more trust than fear, so I am safe.

We are not entirely safe: disasters do happen. 9/11, Newtown, Trayvon Martin. Only a zombie would say there is nothing to worry about. Simplistic qualifications might

be made: don't worry *too much*; don't worry *about yourself*, pray *more*. Does such advice work, can anyone really use it?

The idea of usefulness brings the idea that anxiety may be something to put to use in the spiritual life. Things we can't *avoid* or *fight* may be given us to *use* and to *figure out*. Anxiety might be something we learn from, it might be an avenue of self-discovery.

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus does not simply command or prohibit, "so I tell you, do not be anxious." He also asks questions. "Is not *life* more than food, and the body more than clothing? Are you not of more *value* than the birds of the air or the lilies of the field?" These questions do not call for simple objective answers of yes or no. Rather they invite us to find out what we can, even from "bad" things like anxiety, about *value* and *life*, which, Jesus reminds us, is more than existence. In my experience, I learned from difficult things-- my mother's surgery, my father's burnt chicken, the neighbor giving comfort, my mother's panicked face—what is really precious. What did I learn from the church floor that did not collapse? I'm still working on that one.

Gabriel Myers, OSB