

SERMONS AT TRINITY

Sunday, November 23, 2008

“basileria tou theou”

The Rev. R. Cameron Miller

Good morning.

Today's Gospel from Matthew has special, deeply personal, significance for me. 26 1/2 years ago Katy and I selected this passage for the reading at our wedding.

Over the years I have frequently offered it as one of the options to couples getting married, but of the scores of people I have helped launch into the realm of matrimony, maybe three of them chose Matthew for their wedding. And who can blame them really?

At the absolute pinnacle of stress, surrounded by the both the better and worse angels of our natures coaching us on what to *dream* and aggrandizing our hunger for *more*, who in their right mind is going to choose a little sermon about anxiety...and being detached from those very things that are opening the valves to your psychic adrenaline?

Besides, every time I read this part of Jesus' sermon I am struck by my deep and pervasive failure to simply "witness the lilies of the field and how they grow."

I witnessed my kids and how their appetites, and my food bills grew.

I witnessed my mortgage and credit cards and how my debt grew.

I witnessed my midsection and how it keeps on growing.

The only thing I haven't witnessed grow is my hair.

But truly, I regard this little gem as a personal message from the lips of Jesus right to my own ears. Jesus *whispers* it to me - never yells it - whispers it to me: "*Cam, don't worry about your life. Can worry add to your years, or can it make the years you have any better? Cam, don't worry about your life. Save your concern for the really big things - and no, you are not one of the really big things.*"

Now I just don't know how I can say what there is here to say without *sounding religious*. But this is the Mother Load of wisdom...it really is.

And you know, I would not risk *sounding religious* or go out on the limb of credibility like I am about to do, if I didn't know that there were a great deal of truly wise people backing me up here. In fact, I may look like I am standing all by myself up here but feel like I have the spiritual equivalent to the Verizon Network standing right behind me.

While it may get said with different words, through a myriad of cultural metaphors and religious symbols, the rock of wisdom embedded in this little sermonette from Jesus is the priceless stone, or pearl of most precious purity, to be found in Judaism, Islam, Buddhism as well as Christianity.

So witness the lilies of the field and how they grow...

While full of poetic images, Jesus' wisdom peels back to reveal two eyes staring at us from the center of the universe like a cat in the dark. And a voice whispers two lines, each its own mantra. "Do not worry about *your* life." Do not worry about *your* life. Do not worry about *your* life.

And the other..."Strive *first* for the kingdom of God." Strive *first* for the kingdom of God. Strive *first* for the kingdom of God.

Strategically, if we *strive first* of the kingdom of God, in fact, we will not worry much about our own lives. So that is where I will begin. Now I know that sounds *terribly religious* and not very credible, a lot like the high calorie/low nutrient theological cotton candy most of us flee from. But give me just a moment and an open mind to see if maybe it holds more than meets the eye.

Basileria tou theou

That is Aramaic for the Kingdom of God. *Basileria tou theou* is the sun around which all of Jesus' other wisdom orbits.

Now I don't want you to think this is an abstract idea - an intellectual concept. No, not at all. For Jesus it is much more personal and concrete than some soft theological idea.

You see, *basileia tou theou*, or the kingdom of God, is associated with a very special word that Jesus taught us: *Abba*. *Abba* is also Aramaic. The Romans translated it into Latin as "Father" but that is not its meaning at all. *Abba* means "daddy" or "papa" or its feminine equivalent for "mommy". That one little word, *Abba*, summed up for Jesus the very *relationship between God and humankind*; and with that one little word, *Abba*, Jesus said that our relationship with God is like that *between a parent and a child*.

Now we may not think that is so amazing because that idea is already floating around someplace in all the other things we've thought or heard about God.

But once again, context is everything.

One thing we know about *first century Judean peasant culture*, the one Jesus lived in, is that a son grew up to take on his father's work. There was no social mobility so he would grow up to be a peasant farmer or perhaps a tradesman. And the young boy learned that work, not by going to school but by standing at his daddy's side. He learned his work by watching his dad and doing what his dad did...by *mimicking* his father. The same would be true for mothers and daughters.

More than once, Jesus says that the goal for human beings - the *purpose and meaning of life* to put it in modern language - is to "grow up and be like our Father or Mother." Just like the young Middle Eastern boy or girl grows up at their parent's side watching, copying, learning to be what his or her parent *is* and to do what his or her parent *does*, so it is with us and God, Jesus says.

It is in that relationship that Jesus' ethical and spiritual practice is rooted. Jesus says that *God is to us as a father or mother who we are to grow up and be like*. We are the sons and daughters of God and we are to grow up and be like God.

How is that possible?

How is it possible that anxious creatures like us, who worry about everything whether or not those *things* even matter very much – how is it we can become *like* God? Well, it is very concrete. When we do the *work* of God we become *like* God. When we do the *work* of God we become god-like.

Think of the prayer Jesus taught us to pray: “*Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*” or “*may we be like you here and now.*”

So whenever God’s will is done on earth as in heaven, *there* is the kingdom of God. Wherever people act *like* God as a child learns to do the work of the parent, the kingdom of God has *arrived*.

Whenever *two or more* people start doing the work of God *together*, the result is *ecclesia*. *Ecclesia* is translated as “church.” So Jesus’ idea of church has nothing to do with buildings or doctrines or dogmas or priesthoods or worship rituals or empires.

Jesus’ idea of *church* has to do with two or more people *doing the work of their Abba* and when they do, the kingdom of God *arrives*. Right there in that little spot where two or more are actually acting *like* God, the kingdom of God *arrives!*

The wisdom is that *doing the work* of your father or mother *who art in heaven* transforms us, over time, so that we can do things we wouldn’t ordinarily be able to do – like not worry about *your* life. Like witness the lilies of the field and not be anxious about how much *stuff* we have, or how good our *stuff* is, or how *insulated* we are from deprivation.

When two or three people *do the work of their Abba* God’s kingdom breaks into the world right then and there in that little spot. And I know that you know that this is utterly true. You may not use language like “the kingdom of God,” but I know that you have had the experience of two or more people doing something and suddenly...and suddenly, the moment and the place and the very atmosphere around you was transformed.

When we *do the work of God*, when we *act like God*, over time, we will be transformed and then...we really will begin to worry much less about ourselves.

And when we do the work of God together, we really will begin to notice a difference and we will *know*, even if we cannot see the results, that something is changing and that, together, we have been the authors of that change.

These are anxious times we are in but we can decide to *do the work of God*, to act *like God*, and let the chips fall where they may...We can choose, in fact, to let tomorrow worry for itself.

Again, this is very concrete and actionable.

- 1. If we seek first *to be like God* we will worry far less about ourselves.**
- 2. And if we seek to be *like God* with two or more other people, we will discover that the kingdom of God will break into where we are gathered.**

In an anxious world at an anxious time, Trinity can model that behavior and lead that mantra, and if we do, we will encounter the kingdom of God breaking into our little space right here on Delaware.