

“Releasing Our Anxiety”

Matthew 6.19–21 and 24–34

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 1 March 2009

It's 7:00 a.m. on Friday morning, and I'm checking my work emails between making lunches for Cameron and Christopher. I get an email forwarded by one of our members from the head warden of the prominent Episcopal parish in the town where I grew up. (It's the church the Bushes went to.) The letter details how bad things are financially at Christ Church: laying off a clergyperson, cutting their music budget by more than \$50,000, cutting diocesan support by more than \$50,000, cutting facilities costs by more than \$50,000, and cutting outreach by more than \$50,000. **OUCH!**

Then I drive Cam to Webber Junior High and on the way back listen to the single most depressing economic story I've ever heard on National Public Radio. It's about the condition of the nation's largest banks and the amount of “toxic assets” they hold and how much more it will take for taxpayers like you, me, and the grandchildren I don't yet have to bail them out. An American economist from Deutsche Bank published a paper saying he thought what was needed was for the federal government to go into banks and purchase all of the “toxic assets” at the highest price they could afford: that's the cost of keeping banks afloat. An economist at MIT called the banker's estimation a “robbery note” and the reporter described it as a “ransom note.” (Being held hostage is no fun.)

I arrive back at home and unwrap the *Denver Post* and read about the demise of the *Rocky Mountain News*, the oldest newspaper in Colorado, which after more than 150 years, has fallen victim to Craigslist and the lousy economy.

Are you feeling anxious yet? I sure was. And to top it off, I still hadn't started writing my sermon, which is usually done on Thursday! Clearly, it was time for a spiritual reality check ... and another cup of coffee.



Do you remember the sermon I gave a few weeks back on authority? Well, Jesus **is** authoritative. Jesus trumps all the pundits and the politicians and the preachers, too. Two thousand years from now, the names “Ben Bernanke” and “Alan Greenspan” won't even be a blip on the screen. But, for some reason, we and over a billion other human beings, continue to find hope, solace, and truth in the words of Jesus of Nazareth, who had no financial assets – toxic or otherwise.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal.” Now, if Jesus were speaking today, he might not have said it quite that way. After all, most of us don't worry so much about moths and rust ... thieves maybe, but not moths and rust. Perhaps, Jesus would have said something like, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, which are vulnerable to swings in the stock market and which can be decimated by the whims of Wall Street.” Or maybe something like this: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, which can disappear from your 401(k) overnight, and they were paper assets anyway that you didn't really work to earn.”

Have we been putting too much stock in ... the stock market? Have we become overly reliant on the Federal Reserve Bank to tell us how we're doing? Are we kidding ourselves into thinking that the most important things in life are things?

Have we been trying to serve two masters: paying less attention to God than to our investment accounts? I don't know about you, but I sometimes find it difficult to remember when I'm listening to the news or reading the paper that the economy is not the be-all and end-all.

You may be saying to yourself, “That’s fine for Sunday morning, Hal, but reality hits Monday morning with the opening bell, and I’ve got real concerns about my family’s financial wellbeing.” I share your concerns. I live with them myself.

“Do not worry, saying ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Would you think me naïve if I said that I believed that? Well, go ahead and call me naïve! I think that we are in a unique position as Christians in an economic downturn. I don’t have any illusions that the vast majority of Americans trust in the dollar, not in God. And we are coming into an amazing opportunity to really trust in God. (I find it amazingly ironic that our coinage and currency bears the motto, “In God We Trust.” But, I’m glad it’s there as a reminder, even if it is wishful thinking.)



Where is your intention these days? Where do you find your mind wandering when you have a spare moment in the car or before bed? I think many of us probably spend time worrying about our economic wellbeing. And if you’ve just lost your job, or layoffs at your company have just been announced, of course that’s what you’ll be thinking about.

But, I think we all need to start reorienting the way we think and what energy we are expending on fear of the economic unknown.

Do you know that apocryphal story about a Cherokee grandfather sharing wisdom with his grandson? He tells the boy, “There are two wolves within me. One is evil, filled with greed, anger, fear, and envy. One is good, filled with love, joy, peace, and faith. And they are locked in a battle.” The grandson thoughtfully asks, “Which wolf will win the fight?” And the grandfather says, “The one I feed.”

Which wolf is our culture feeding? Which wolf are **you** feeding?

There are different ways to think about the current economic climate. We can easily work ourselves into a lather of fear and anxiety. But, I think it also is going to present us with some really good opportunities to be a caring community for one another. (Let’s all be attentive to that!) One of the small things we’ve started already in response to the recession is having a dinner-and-a-movie night, so that we can get together in community, have a good time together, share a meal, maybe be enlightened or entertained by a film, and not have to spend more than the cost of sharing food.

Our first order of business is to strive for the kingdom of God. That means realizing who is ultimately in charge. It means ordering our lives in such a way that God comes first. It means that sacrifices will be demanded of us. It means that we will stand up for justice for the oppressed.

If we do those things, we can put the rest in the hands of the Holy Spirit, to do with as she sees fit.



I wrote in the March *Placard* about the Serenity Prayer used by Twelve-Step programs and how it can be a tool we use to diffuse anxiety. If you don’t know the prayer, you can find the original version by Reinhold Niebuhr in the back of the New Century Hymnal. It’s number 852, so let’s say it together: “God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.”

I’ve talked about the things that you and I cannot change: the banking system, the stock market, and a wide array of economic variables. And I’ve talked about things that you

and I can do to make a difference in each other's lives: to affect what is going on within this community of faith and keeping it vibrant; to pay attention to God and where God is calling you; working for the reign of God; doing justice; acting with compassion; and supporting one another through the rough times we encounter.

One of the other great antidotes for the type of generalized anxiety that bad economic news seems to cause is focusing on gratitude. You are surrounded by an incredible group of people, all of whom are here for roughly the same reason: to be a community of faith and support that you can tap into. And you are surrounded by the love of God, which is the only reason any of us is here to begin with.

Here's a little exercise that you might try sometime: make a gratitude list. Sit down with a pen and a piece of paper and start with the letter A and list 26 things for which you are grateful to God ... beginning with something like **air** and working your way through **Zolo** (which is a fabulous Mexican restaurant in Boulder). Focusing your attention on all you have to be grateful for enables you "rent less space" in your mind to negative thoughts.

And a related way to relieve anxiety is to get outside or find another way to appreciate the glory of God through creation. I tend to get stuck behind my computer screen too much, so just getting out for a walk on the Spring Creek Trail enables me to chill out and look at bulbs pushing their way up through the winter soil or seeing green shoots just at ground level in clusters or grass or marvel at the slender moon.

Together as a people of faith, we can release the anxieties that we feel, but we'll need to be intentional about it. It may mean occasionally turning off the radio and tuning into God. But, Lent is a great time to do that!

Will you pray with me? God, you have told us that you will provide for our needs, so help us to release the anxious fears that haunt us. You have told us to work for your reign, which is still unfolding all around us. Give us strength to do that work and provide us with the wisdom to discern what we **can** do and what we must release to **you**. Amen.