

PENTECOST II

Jesus said, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or your body, what you will wear." In the name of God, who knows our needs: Amen.

A few weeks back, I heard a lecture by Harvard Law professor Elizabeth Warren called "The Coming Collapse of the Middle Class". [It's available streaming at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=akVL7QY0S8A>] That's sort of an apocalyptic title, but there's been enough bad news lately that it makes sense. The national savings rate is negative. Bankruptcies and foreclosures are at record highs. What was striking about Prof. Warren's talk was, she actually has some hard numbers on where the money goes, and it's not where you'd expect. The conventional wisdom is that people are in trouble because they're buying enormous SUVs, designer baby bjorns, and organic arugula from Whole Foods. But actually, once you adjust for inflation, the median American family of four spends 32% less on clothing now than forty years ago. Food is down 18%. The cost per car is down 24%. Americans spend far less on consumer goods now than in 1970.

The trouble all comes from four things: Mortgages, health care, childcare, and education. Nationwide, adjusted for inflation, the mortgage on a three-bedroom, one-bath house costs 76% more than it did in 1970. Rates on a mortgage are down, but real estate has gone haywire. That is not just Boston. Health care: The Micah Project, which placed me at St John's two years ago as an intern, had to spend five figures insuring a healthy twenty-three-year-old. Education we all know about: Ask anyone my age about our student loans-- although you might not want to do that when the kids are around. And I probably don't need to tell all y'all about childcare costs.

So. Imagine Jesus telling you: Do not worry about your mortgage, or your health care, or your children's education. I can't really imagine that-- I don't have kids or a mortgage-- so I can't tell you how to respond to it either. But how would you respond, if Jesus said that to you?

Because in his time and place, that's what he was saying. Most people were a bad harvest or two from starvation. The Bible is full of stories about people starving to death. That was as real a possibility as foreclosure or bankruptcy are today. This word from Jesus would have been that tough to swallow.

Now, I'm going to argue in a minute that this passage makes more sense if you take it in the context of the rest of Jesus' teaching. But first, I want to remind us that

some people actually are called to take it out of context and read it literally. I'm thinking of people like Dorothy Day, St Francis, the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Their examples show that we can make the Sermon on the Mount our rule of life. That is an option. It is one, I should say, that speaks to my heart. I think all of us, especially if we're single, should listen to see if God is calling us here.

But for the rest of us, I think Jesus' teaching starts to make more sense when we fast forward to the place in Scripture where we see it carried out-- that is, in the book of Acts. In that community, everyone followed this word from Jesus with no problem. Nobody had to worry about their food or clothing-- because they took all Jesus' teachings as a whole, so they all worried about each other's food and clothing. And then nobody had to worry about their own! Maybe that sounds too easy, but I want to argue there's a very deep truth to it.

You see, today in America, it is easy not to worry about food and clothing for a different reason: We have made them cheap. According to Prof. Warren, whom I quoted earlier, consumers have demanded cheaper food and clothes, and we've gotten them. We are today much more likely to die of complications from obesity than from starvation. Food insecurity is still real in America, but it's still relatively easy to give everybody their consumer goods. The free market will do that.

What it won't do is give everybody security. In Jesus' time-- or in most of the world today-- when security consisted in food and clothing, the market doesn't give those to everybody. Not that the state is necessarily an improvement: The Romans would just give out enough bread and circuses to fend off riots, and that was it. For us, it's the same thing: The market cannot, and the government has not, given us economic security in the form of adequate affordable housing, universal health care, and universally decent public education. They could do more-- and I don't think I need to sell y'all on the politics there. But I don't think Jesus' call is about politics first, not as such. I think it's about community.

No matter what the political and economic situation, we cannot be secure without community, without each other. Jesus is pointing us toward the way we were made to live. God wants to make us secure, and I think God wants to use us to make each other more secure. Some people, as God calls them to it, are able to depend wholly on God for their subsistence, and more power to them. But most of us need to meet God in each other too. The good news is, we get to do that here. As hard as it may be to believe-- as hard as it may be to live-- Jesus is telling us in today's Gospel that God will give us all we

need. Our Catholic neighbors are celebrating Corpus Christi this morning, thanking God for the gift of the Eucharist. I like that festival for this Gospel, because I believe that when we gather around the altar and stand as the Body of Christ, we have everything we need to make each other secure.

When Jesus says don't worry, he doesn't just mean be happy: He means be hospitable, be generous. At St John's we're trying to live out that call: Our mission statement quotes the Rule of St Benedict, "Let all who enter here be received as Christ." Frankly, I think we are an uncommonly hospitable and generous community. I think we are learning here how to be hospitable and generous in all the communities we're part of. This community's been a gift to me, like to so many of us, not only because I've been welcomed so much, but because I've learned how to welcome others.

What would you need for this community to become your security? I reckon we'll all have different answers to that. But I believe and I pray that as we gather together, God will lead us to those answers in and through each other. The gifts of God are the people of God. Thanks be to God!

Amen.