

**“DO NOT WORRY”**  
**Genesis 18:1-15; Matthew 9:35 - 10:8**  
**May 25, 2008**  
**The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger**

There is a lot of bad news in the world today. You may have noticed. There's the war in Iraq and soaring oil prices. There's terrorism, hatred, genocide, flood, famine, cyclone, and earthquake. There's global warming and the growing body of evidence that we are on the brink of environmental holocaust. Three billion people on our planet—that's roughly half the population of the earth—three billion people live on less than \$2 a day, in dire poverty, which Gordon Brown, the new prime minister of the UK reminded us earlier this month creates a situation neither just nor secure. And, oh yes, as if our global woes were not enough, in the midst of all this, we, individuals have lives. Lives that engage us, lives that demand our attention. Mine's not perfect right now. How about yours? Do you have personal concerns about health, or employment, or financial security, about what's going on in your family, or your psyche, or just how all the things you have to do on Tuesday are going to get done without adding another five hours to your day.

And into the face of all this, we hear this morning's gospel lesson: “Do not worry about your life, about what you shall eat or what you shall drink, or about your body, what you shall wear.” Do not worry? How can we not worry? Really. How many of you are not worried about your life or about the world? And does Jesus really want us to consider the lilies of the field, and stop toiling and spinning, and have us just assume that we will be arrayed like Solomon.

Do not worry. Why shouldn't we worry? What does Jesus really mean with this teaching? Some years ago, I was asked to participate in a student forum at OSU—liberal theologian debates conservative theologian on what it means to be “Christian.” For his initial presentation, my conservative counterpart stood up and gave a lecture on how being a Christian is practical, prudent, and profitable. He obviously both loved alliteration and tidy three-part exposition. And you will notice that while I might not have agreed with his analysis, ten years later I still remember exactly what he said and he probably doesn't even remember my name. Now I want to be clear here. I don't want to imply that this pastor's world view is the understanding of all religious conservatives. But there are within the church always some portion of Christians, liberal and conservative, who wants to think that we believe because faith is good for us. Faith is good for our lives in that it will somehow save us from worry, from evil, from catastrophe. If we are Christian, then our children will not get in trouble. If we are Christian, our intimate relationships will never founder. If we are Christian, then we will be somehow immune to downsizing, to poverty, to loss.

Some part of me truly wishes that were a truth I could proclaim with integrity. Because then it would make sense for us to be Christian. Then it would be reasonable for us to choose commitment to God in Christ, the way of the gospel. It would be reasonable not to worry if we follow Christ. But I don't really think that's what Jesus had in mind.

Jim Wallis, theologian, cultural critic, editor of *Sojourners Magazine* and author of the best-selling book, God's Politics, was one of the lecturers at the conference I attended this last week.

He talked a lot about the Gospel of Matthew and the Sermon on the Mount and today's text in particular. I think he was trying to help all of us pastors who had to both fly home and write a sermon yesterday. Wallis's take on Jesus' injunction not to worry is in the context of Matthew's interpretation of the whole gospel: that you can never reach the Good News of the gospel outside of the bad news of the world. Instead, what it means to be a person of faith is to proclaim the good news looking the bad news squarely in the face. In terms of this particular text, what that means is that Jesus did not intend his "do not worry" to be words of fact or comfort, or words to encourage us to turn a blind eye to the problems and sorrows of the world. The sermon on the Mount, not just in this part but in all its parts, is Jesus' fullest and most radical, challenging exposition of what it means to be his disciple. "Do not worry. . ." is not intended—it was never intended—to be a logical or reasonable response to the world around us but, in fact, a leap of faith. Not logical, not reasonable at all, just faith.

Why do we make that leap? Why do we not worry, not make ourselves anxious to the point of paralysis or despair over all that is wrong and bad and terrifying. Because we are God's. Simply that. Because we are God's. Because if we believe, we proclaim that we came from God and will return to God. Because we believe, or are trying to believe, in every moment of our life, no matter what else is going on, we are, and will always be, God's beloved ones. Just by existing, we are God's beloved, of more value to God even than the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. If I had more time this morning, I would tell you about this wonderful interpretation I heard of this text from an environmental theologian, how lovingly God considers the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, and still we are of more value than they. But if I go down that road, it's another whole sermon. So I'll come back. We live our lives as God's people. And that, Jesus challenges us, that should be our primary reality. In fact, if we are truly faithful in our discipleship, it will be our only reality because we simply cannot live with God as our Master, with God as our motivator, with God as our home, and at the same time, serve any other master, heed any other motivator, or claim any other home. It just doesn't work. We are God's. If there is any basic claim the Bible makes, it's just that: that we belong to God, and God to us. And if we are God's, then we live, we serve, we embrace our discipleship, and we trust the rest to God. It is an act of faith, not logic. Because the way of Christian life is not tidy; it is not prudent, practical, or profitable. It is, instead, a landscape littered with what? With crosses. That's the symbol of our faith: crosses. Crosses we have to behold; crosses we have to bear; crosses that can maybe even kill us. Again, this is not practical, nor prudent, nor profitable.

The hardest thing about discipleship, Wallis reminds us, is that we embrace a good news that asserts life will come out of death, that God will triumph over evil; there is no power in heaven and on earth stronger than God's love. But, and this is a big but, be we do not know if and when we will ever see in our lives the fullness of what that means. For 2000 years now, the church has proclaimed the inbreaking of God's kingdom here on earth in Jesus Christ. Two thousand years. And yet, one might observe there is as much or more to make us anxious now as there was then. Still we foolish Christians persist in proclaiming God's love, God's justice, and God's grace. Even though we've never seen that full-blown. Even though the closest most of us come to a vision of God's shalom is hints and glimpses.

Last Friday, my friend Taryn and I were walking back from the conference and there was a little Episcopal church on our route home. We decided to go inside just to see the sanctuary. There are

some beautiful churches in downtown Minneapolis. As we were looking around this lovely little church, a man came in. He identified himself as the sexton, and boy could he talk. He started testifying, and I do mean testifying, about this church and its impact on his life: that once he had been homeless, and one day he had stumbled into the church on a Sunday morning just to get warm, and the congregation there took him in and fed him and clothed him, and eventually gave him his job; they trusted the church to him. Now this man had few teeth; his years on the streets had not been kind to him. But rarely have I met an individual who so radiated that he had found his master, his motivator, his home...in the church, in God, in a life of faithful service that filled him up to a place beyond worry. It was just a half hour on a Friday afternoon, but for me it was a glimpse of the reality of why we choose the way of Jesus, of the cross, of a kingdom of good news breaking in right square in the midst of all the bad news in our lives.

So, therefore, do not worry about your lives, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, or about your body, what you will wear. For the good news is that you are of inestimable value to God. From God you came and to God you will return. The good news of God is as real as the bad news of the world. So do not worry. Instead, get out your cross trainers and take a leap. Leap farther than you have ever leapt before into the life of discipleship. Choose God as your master, your motivator, your home. And you will eat the bread of life and drink from living water. You will run the race of engagement with the world and never grow weary. You will know that you are God's and God is yours and through the mysterious alchemy of faith, that will be enough. Thanks be to God. Amen