

"GOOD NEWS ABOUT GOD"

August 5, 1990

TEXT: Matthew 6:32: ". . . Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. "

This morning is a kind of homecoming for me since I am back in this pulpit again after my vacation. And, as I was thinking about what I would say to you this morning, I thought of that other homecoming when Jesus returned to Nazareth to preach to his old friends and neighbors. And this is what he said: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of the sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (Luke 4:18-19)

Ever since that time, Christ's vision of God's love and grace has been called the "Gospel" or the "Good News." Later, after his death and resurrection, Jesus said to his disciples, "Go into all the world and preach the "Good News" to all creation." (Mark 16:15) In one way or another, that is what every truly Christian sermon is about. And that is what my sermon is about this morning: "Good News about God."

Like Jesus, I am not going to waste time trying to prove that God exists. There are two reasons for that. First of all, I am not sure it is something one can prove. I remember taking a course in the philosophy of religion when I was in college. We spent a lot of time on the so-called proofs for the existence of God, but none of them seemed terribly convincing to me. As someone once said, "For those who believe no proof is necessary, for those who do not, no proof will suffice."

But more importantly, I am not going to waste time trying to prove God's existence because that, by itself, is not necessarily good news. In Jesus's day almost every one believed in some kind of god or gods. But often that belief brought only fear. For the Greeks, the gods were capricious and unreliable. They often used their power to play tricks on mortals or to extort some kind of favor from them. For many of the Jews' Semetic neighbors, gods were fierce adversaries to be placated only by human sacrifice. Even the Jews often thought of God as some kind of stern judge who demanded absolute obedience and who angrily punished even the smallest transgression. Where is the "Good News" in that?

Some years ago, one of this country's most famous preachers, Harry Emerson Fosdick, was confronted by an angry young man who heatedly proclaimed, "I don't believe in God!" Instead of arguing, Dr. Fosdick merely turned to him and said, "Tell me about this God you don't believe in. Perhaps I don't believe in Him either."

The important thing, you see, is not God's existence, but His nature. Is God indifferent, unreliable, vindictive? Or is He understanding, caring, and forgiving? In many ways, that is the most important question in the world. And Christ's answer was good news, indeed, for he insisted that God not only is, but that God cares.

I believe that is what Jesus was saying in this morning's scripture, even though he is often misunderstood. Many of us grew up with the old King James Bible, which read, "Therefore, I say unto you take no thought for your life, what you shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on." And nothing could be farther from the mood of today's world. It sounds as though Jesus was advocating a lackadaisical attitude toward life when we believe that "failing to plan is planning to fail."

Yet that is not what Jesus had in mind at all. Elsewhere he clearly taught the value of careful planning. He said, "For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.'" (Luke 14:28-30)

The problem. The word in Greek is "merimnan", which does not really mean "thought." It means "worry" or "anxiety." So the Revised Standard version, which we heard this morning, reads, "Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life." And that is something altogether different. Thoughtful planning makes good sense, but worrying only makes us miserable. As Edith Bunker once said, "Archie don't know how to worry without gettin' upset." And neither do the rest of us.

As a result, there is not much in life that is worse for us. Dr Charles Mayo wrote, "Worry affects the circulation, the heart, the glands, the whole nervous system. I have never known a man who died from overwork, but many who died of doubt." When we worry we are not only making ourselves miserable, we are also making ourselves sick.

And most of the time we worry without reason. If you really want to test your memories, try to recall what it was you were worried about a year ago. Most of what we worry about never happens, and, if it does, worry rarely helps. Jesus asked, "which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life?" You know the answer as well as I. Worry does not drain tomorrow of its sorrows, it only robs today of its strength.

So when Jesus warned us not to worry about life he was giving good advice. But I think he had something more than that in mind. I think he was not so much telling us about life as teaching us about God. His words are not so much about the folly of worry as about the God who cares. A God who understands all our needs and makes provision for them.

Throughout the Gospels that is the thrust of Jesus' teaching. That is why his characteristic word for God is "Father." Not just his Father, but our Father, too. That is why he taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Not only to remind us that God is the ultimate source of everything we have, but to tell us God cares about all of life, the physical as well as spiritual. That is why he said, "If you who are sinners know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him." (Matthew 7:11) Not to encourage indolence, but to remind us that God cares.

And, for me at least, that is "Good News about God." Good news and important news. It changes our whole outlook on life. Knowing God cares lets us face disappointment and uncertainty with confidence and hope, with a peace the world can neither give nor take away.

I can testify to that from personal experience. As some of you know, two weeks ago last night my mother passed away. She knew death was coming and welcomed it without regret. Not because she was stoically facing the inevitable, but because a long time ago she learned to trust the God who cares. Not only learned to trust God herself, but taught her children to do the same. Some of my earliest memories are of sitting on her lap or at her feet while she read Bible stories to me and my brothers.

And it was her faith, which she shared with us, that lets us accept her death the way we do. I can not say that we have no regrets, but we do have peace, a peace which only faith can bring. Not just faith that God exists, but that He cares, that He has made provision for my mother --and for all of us-- far beyond the little part of life that we can see. "Therefore I tell you do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink; nor about your body, what you shall put on. . . . your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things shall be yours as well." "For I am persuaded that neither life nor death, nor things present nor things to come . . . nor anything else in all creation shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39) AMEN.