

[This sermon was preached in the spring of 2001 at the community eucharist of the School of Theology. Also present that day were regents and trustees of the University of the South.]

The Non-Anxious Church
Matthew 10: [5-21] 22-32

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Joe G. Burnett
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The Chapel of the Apostles, The School of Theology
The University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee

Forgive the Twelve if they seem a bit reticent now. Jesus has just called them together, and he is sending them on an outlandish mission. “Go and proclaim the good news,” he says. Say, “The kingdom is near.” Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Take no money, no bag, no sandal, no staff, one tunic.

And then there’s my favorite instruction—that slightly different spin on new member ministry: Knock on the doors of the first prospects you meet, and announce that you’re moving in! And, you’re staying until you’re finished with the new church start!

“Let your peace be upon that house,” Jesus says. But if it is not worthy, take it back, shake the dust off your feet, and move on. You know, Sodom and Gomorrah, and all that. You will be like “sheep in the midst of wolves.” You’ll be arrested, flogged, and dragged into some kangaroo court. But not to worry! For what you are to say will be given to you at that time.

Oh, and don’t concern yourself at first with plans for that new multi-purpose family life center. Because my gospel will turn brother against brother, fathers against children, and children against their parents.

And just one more thing: “...you will be hated by all because of my name.”

Note that this take on evangelism ministry is somewhat different than we see today. Can you imagine a diocese running this ad in *Episcopal Life*?

Treacherous but growing new subdivision, needs missionary. No career track, limited pay, zero benefits. Only self-starters with no immediate survivors need apply.

In our nominally churched society, such a mission as Matthew describes in chapter ten seems outrageous. And yet Jesus has the temerity to say, “Do not worry.” Do not be anxious.

We’ve heard this before. Earlier in Matthew’s story, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Do not be anxious.” He was affirming God’s providential care in the midst of the disciples’ fretting about the so-called “necessities” of life. “Do not worry,” “take no thought,” “do not be anxious,” Jesus told them. Do not be anxious about your life, or about what you will eat, or what

you will drink, and so on. For God, who so abundantly feeds the birds of the air, and so lavishly clothes the grass of the field—God knows you have need of all these things. Strive first for God’s kingdom, and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Interesting how we get echoes of that sermon in our lesson for today:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Mt. 10:29-31).

Take no thought about what you are to eat or drink. Do not worry that I have sent you out in the midst of a hostile world. Do not be afraid. Do not be anxious.

The more I hear those words, the more I am reminded of some striking parallels with the teaching of a modern day Rabbi, the late Edwin Friedman. As many of you know, his language about anxiety has become part of the everyday lingo of many clergy, care givers, and helping professionals. Friedman’s basic theory of leadership had to do not with how much information one had, or how well any given technique had been mastered. It had little to do with expertise, but very much to do with how a leader functions within his or her emotional system.

Crucial to any successful leadership, Friedman argued, and to the health of any family or community, is a leader who can define his or her own goals and values while maintaining a non-anxious presence within the system. Being non-anxious means being self-differentiated, non-reactive, and yet still closely connected to the people we serve.¹

Countless persons have benefited from his simple and direct approach to leadership. He often referred to it as “headship.” But despite this evocative scriptural language, very few have recognized in his thought (the mentorship of Murray Bowen notwithstanding) its deep scriptural roots. Indeed, Friedman once said that what makes pastoral counseling pastoral is not whether we have packaged our psychology in scripture, but whether we, the pastors, have listened to scripture. I have long been intrigued with the fact that Friedman’s ideas find their most logical philosophical home in the synoptic portrait of Jesus of Nazareth.

Look again at Matthew’s gospel, and then again at this particular passage for today, with “Friedman eyes.” From start to finish Matthew’s story is brimming with anxiety. Some of it is revealed in the language Matthew uses. Words and phrases that we translate “have no fear,” “do not be afraid,” “take no thought,” “do not worry,” can also be understood as “Do not be anxious.”

Yet, anxiety is all around. You can see it in the people, you can see it in the religious leaders, you can see it in the disciples. And in the mist of it all stands Jesus. He remains, from start to finish, the quintessential non-anxious one.

Look at the announcement of his birth. Joseph is told by the angel of the Lord, do not be “afraid” to take Mary as your wife. When wise men from the East come seeking the newborn king, Herod, and all Jerusalem with him, are “troubled,” “anxious.” The disciples on the boat in

the middle of the windstorm are asked by Jesus, “Why are you afraid?” The chief priests and Pharisees who are stung by his parables want to arrest him, but they “fear” the crowds.

Over and over again, Jesus encounters and engages the people, the religious leaders, and the disciples with his compelling preaching, teaching, and healing. And over and over again the response of almost all comers is, anxiety. And yet Jesus urges them time and again: Do not be afraid. Do not be anxious. Indeed, in the closing verses of the gospel, when the risen Jesus meets the women running from the empty tomb, he says, “do not be afraid.” And then he says, “Go, and tell.” And he sends the disciples “into all the world” to “preach the gospel...”

So in today’s passage, as Jesus sends them out, he says “have no fear:”

What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. (Mt. 10:27-28).

Fear, worry, careful thought—anxiety—have no place in the mission of the church. And yet, when I look around the Episcopal Church today, I see it a lot of anxiety.

Back in March when Neil Alexander and I and the other candidates for Bishop of Atlanta were traveling around that diocese for what they called their “Presentation Events,” I was asked this question in one of the groups. “What do you think is the most important issue in the Episcopal Church today?” Without a moment’s hesitation, I replied, “Anxiety.”

You will recall, of course, that I lost the election.

But purple shirt or no purple shirt, I stand by my answer. Anxiety is the “sleeper” issue in the Episcopal Church today. Ironically, this anxiety erupts at a time when our society enjoys unparalleled prosperity. It manifests itself at a time when the church in this country has only minor league opposition. It comes at a time when, unlike our brothers and sisters in some other lands, where being Christian still invites persecution and retaliation, we live in communities where the mission of Jesus as outlined in Matthew seems overly dramatic.

In spite of all this, anxiety is prevalent in the church today, especially in the Episcopal Church. And this is the context in which most of you are going to be living and functioning as pastors, priests, and parish leaders. What can you do, what can I do, that will help us respond to this with faithfulness and integrity? I think there are some things we can learn about all this from Friedman; from Athanasius, perhaps; and, most of all—thanks to Matthew’s story—from Jesus.

Now I’m not talking here about everyday, garden-variety anxiety. I’ve been going down on Sundays recently to St. Luke’s, a pastoral size Episcopal congregation in Scottsboro, Alabama. They are currently looking for a new rector, and they’re a little anxious right now. That’s to be expected. It’s OK. It’s not making them crazy.

No, the kind of anxiety I'm talking about is much more pervasive, and more destructive. It's the sort of anxiety I think Jesus warned against. This kind of anxiety begins to make the church, and its members, and its ministers, something less than fully functional and healthy. Here's one example of how it works its way through a system.

Five years ago, a new family showed up in my parish one Sunday morning. When I called on them the following week, I was surprised to learn that they were members of the Reformed Episcopal Church. For those of you who may not know, the Reformed Episcopal Church broke away from the Episcopal Church back in the mid-nineteenth century. Until recently, this sectarian movement had almost become extinct, but controversies over things like women's ordination, prayer book revision, and human sexuality have "recharged" its batteries, so to speak. Nowadays, many in the Reformed Church are linking up with folks in the AMiA movement, the so-called Anglican Mission in America.

Anyway, Jeff, the husband, was a former Baptist and Presbyterian, and he had become a deacon in the Reformed Church. I talked with them frankly about the ethos and mission of our parish, and welcomed them with open arms. The only question was, could they be comfortable here?

I said to them, "This parish is a microcosm of the Episcopal Church. There are members who are conservatives and liberals, low church and high church, 'turned on' and 'turned off.' It's a pluralistic environment."

For about two years, it seemed they could make it work. There were moments of disagreement and tension, but for the most part they were active and well liked. Until. Until Jeff decided to begin attending my Assistant Rector's somewhat freewheeling discussion group. This diverse assortment of professional men and women included many who were on a faith pilgrimage marked by intellectual struggle. But they were drawn to Trinity, drawn to the liturgy, drawn to the community—and they were committed to continuing the journey.

At some point, the group decided to explore the topic of human sexuality. That's when Deacon Jeff's anxiety got raised to a fever pitch. Before long, parishioners were telling me about his anger in class. Soon thereafter someone reported that he had gone around to several members with copies of a little paperback book by Walter Winkⁱⁱ (my Assistant had used this as one of several discussion starters in this series). Jeff was saying that the clergy at Trinity were "teaching false doctrine and corrupting the youth."

It should come as no surprise to the seniors who have been in my pastoral theology class this term that, in response to these attacks, my Assistant and I did nothing. Nothing, that is, except to keep reaching out to Jeff and his family with love and acceptance.

A few weeks later, Jeff was in my office announcing his family's intention to leave Trinity. We had a stiff but cordial visit. And then, as quickly as they had come, Jeff and his family—and all their anxiety—were gone.

Some months later I was besieged by a small crowd of folks at a parish dinner who were all worked up about the latest news from Jeff's family. It seems he was about to be ordained a

priest in the Reformed Episcopal Church, and would soon be opening a mission congregation in our community. “What will we do,” they cried?

“Why, nothing.” I replied. And then I added, “Who do you think we might lose to such an enterprise?” One or two names were mentioned. One or two out of our 900 members. And indeed they were right. We lost those two. But, for a time, the *anxiety* over what *might* happen, and who all *might* leave, had traveled around a good bit of the parish family system.

That’s the way anxiety works. It creates a “crisis” of sorts, but more often than not it is an illusion, an imagined catastrophe.

We can draw this illustration large in terms of the Episcopal Church as a whole. Dissident bishops often succeed in unsettling enough clergy with fears of imminent disaster that they entice them to jump ship. Those clergy, in turn, stir the anxious waters of their parishes, and often get several lay folk to jump ship. The faithful who remain, naturally, begin to get anxious about what’s coming next. Who’ll pay for the new family life center? What about our day school? Will we be able to stay afloat?

Before long anxiety makes its way through the food chain and even finds expression in our efforts at mission and evangelism. Unfortunately, outreach that is born of anxiety tends to lead to theological hair-splitting, doctrinal witch-hunts, and the break-up of otherwise healthy communities of faith. Because we fear for our future and our growth, we begin to behave differently when we say who we are, and what our perspective on the gospel is, and how we worship, and whom we welcome. And we turn a deaf ear to that persistent voice in the back of our minds, which says, “no money, no bag, no sandal, no staff, one tunic...do not be anxious.”

Several years ago the husband of a prominent laywoman and vestry member in my parish called for an appointment. Gordon had been raised Baptist. He had come reluctantly into the Episcopal Church only because Doris, his wife, was so active and involved. But Gordon had never been very happy. He didn’t like the liturgy, he didn’t like the Church School classes, he didn’t like the atmosphere or the ethos, and he certainly didn’t like the reports he would read in the newspaper every three years when General Convention met. When he came into my office that particular day, he was as dejected and upset as I had ever seen him. “Pastor,” he said, “this just isn’t working for me.” I listened for awhile, and then I said, “Gordon, what can I do, what can *we* do, to make it better for you?” He thought for a moment, and then with a stunning flash of honesty he said, “You can stop being Episcopalian.”

For him, that meant the same thing it meant to my Reformed Episcopal friend, Jeff: Put an end to this diversity; not quite so much “moderation in all things;” tighten up on the liberality; soft pedal the liturgy; teach the scriptures literally; generally, clean house. What baffled him, and obviously baffles so many today, is that somewhere in this rowdy, rag-tag eucharistic community that’s been launched into the world from an astonishing series of English Reformation political and theological circumstances—somewhere in here is the good news of the gospel that so many of us who call ourselves Episcopalians have heard, and to which we have responded. We have heard Jesus saying to us, “Do not be anxious.” And we are not.

Today, we do well to remember Athanasius. In his own time, and in his own way, Athanasius faced an anxious church as a truly non-anxious presence. Five times he was exiled for his stubborn refusal to abandon what he understood to be the orthodox faith. *Athanasius contra mundum*—“Athanasius against the world”—was the motto that went around among the *intelligentsia*, on pursed lips sneering with laughter.

But the people loved him! His stellar vision—in words that would in varied expression give voice to Christological thinking for centuries to come—was simply this: Jesus saves.

“Do not be anxious,” Jesus said. “Only fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

What is it that brings such destruction? Could it be the same for us as it was for the disciples in mission? Could it be precisely that anxiety that is born of a deep lack of faith and trust in God and the gospel? Could it be when we as parish priests become anxious for ourselves and our status in the face of other people’s freedom, because we no longer can tell them what to believe? What if, instead, we simply offer them what we have to offer?

Could it be that we are anxious about the salvation of the masses because not everyone is going to come to our church or any other church? What if we simply open wide the doors, lift up our hearts, and keep on saying, “The Lord be with you?”

Could it be that we are anxious for the gospel message, because we suspect that it does not have the power it once had? Can we simply keep on learning, and stay open and keep listening to those who clamor anxiously around? Can we continue to seek new ways to shout from the housetops, in simple and understandable terms, “Jesus saves”?ⁱⁱⁱ

I for one am not anxious about our church or its future. I am not anxious about our growth, or lack of it. I am not anxious about our struggle to remain faithful to the gospel, even in the midst of our raging pluralism. Indeed, my hunch is that if we, like Athanasius, can “stand against” an anxious world—and an anxious church—we will be surprised some morning when, like the disciples in last Sunday’s reading,^{iv} our nets are full, and there are more people present than we ever expected, gathered together on the beach, at the charcoal fire, ready for breakfast.

Notes

ⁱ See Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (1978).

ⁱⁱ Walter Wink, *Homosexuality and the Bible* (1996).

ⁱⁱⁱ Inspiration for these reflections comes from Juan Luis Segundo, S.J., *The Hidden Motives of Pastoral Action: Latin American Reflections* (1972).

^{iv} John 21:1-14.