

July 18, 1971

Old Testament Scripture: Jeremiah 29:1-14
New Testament Scripture Matthew 6:24-34

It seems ironic that the one thing that causes me the most anxiety is preparing and giving a sermon that admonishes us to "take no thought for the morrow." Many times I lie awake Friday and Saturday night worrying about whether I have made myself understood. Have I spoken the truth? Have I spoken it with love? Will I draw attention to myself or am I seeking to direct our attention to the relevance of the Scripture?

I am sure that I am no different than you with regard to anxiety. The root of anxiety is something that we all share in common. It is expressed in that awesome word "responsibility". Unfortunately, some things don't get done unless someone assumes the responsibility to do them, whether they be preaching, selling, cleaning the house or cutting the grass. This is what is called "work", and equally awesome word. And the reason we work is to meet our needs and desires which include more than food, clothing, and shelter ("for life is more than meat, and the body than raiment."). They include also the things of the spirit such as good books, beautiful music, and pre-eminently the need to experience the transcendent God in worship.

So it seems that human needs, work and responsibilities necessarily entail anxiety. In fact, many modern philosophers and theologians have gone so far as to say that anxiety is basic to being a human being; something with which I do not agree. But many times responsibilities and anxieties become so great that we are not able to enjoy either our work or the satisfaction of those needs and desires which move us to work.

It would be relatively easy, therefore, to build a sermon around that theme and conclude it with a romantic appeal to reject work and responsibility so that we can be carefree in our search for the Kingdom of God.

And there does seem to be a romantic irresponsibility present in what Jesus says. "Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on." What could be more hostile responsible action than thoughtlessness?

His illustrations are the stock observations of all romantics from the "flower-children" of our day, to Rousseau, to St. Francis---"Behold the birds of the air... consider the lilies of the field...and the grass of the field."

There is a childlike simplicity and total dependence expressed which seems antithetical to responsibility. You won't find here any hint of the un-Calvinistic doctrine that "God helps those who help themselves." He asks, "Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?" It would be more accurate to say that God helps those because they can't help themselves.

Perhaps the reason it would be easy to preach such a sermon urging a Bohemian style of life is because in our parent-child relationships we have forgotten that the dependence of children on parents does not relieve them of responsibilities. The words of Christ encourage freedom from anxiety and a total dependence upon God for our needs but they do not imply irresponsibility.

He uses the imagery of a father, a child, and a kingdom. The father is depicted as having certain responsibilities. He knows the needs of his children as well as their desires. He feeds, clothes, and protects them.

The child is free from the responsibility of providing for his needs but he does have a responsibility to obey his father. In the imagery that Jesus uses, the child is a prince whose responsibility is to seek first his father's kingdom and righteousness. The imagery is that of a King who has a far-flung empire, parts of

which have not yet submitted to his rule. The command to seek his kingdom is not a command to expand the territory but to extend the influence of his power and righteous judgements.

The Kingdom of God is wherever God rules in the lives of his people. It is the power to break the bonds of sin and injustice whether it be personal or corporate. The kingdom of God is present right now in the lives of those who allow God to control and judge their lives. Yet, we pray for the day when the King shall return in power and in judgement; and, in the words of John Milton,

Truth from the earth, like a flower, Shall bud and blossom then;
And justice, from her heavenly bower, Look down on mortal men."

As children, our responsibility is to seek constantly both to bring our lives more and more under God's control, and to extend his standard of justice in society. These responsibilities are expressed well in the Book of Order of our Church.

"The great ends of the Church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of men; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world." Our response is to be a whole-hearted, single minded obedience to the demands of the kingdom regardless of what it may cost us.

At this point in my preparation I became a little worried because what I just said sounded a little trite and I didn't feel like I had made it very clear what this responsibility meant in particular for businessmen, housewives, and young people. I was just about to write, "If you fulfill this responsibility then not only will you be free from anxiety, but you will also cash in on all those other things you really want." Is Jesus promising bread and circuses to those who cast their ballot with God?

It reminded me of an itinerant preacher who spoke at a church near my home years ago. He said that he had never worked or owned anything; that everything he had had been given to him as he traveled around the country speaking in churches because he had always put God's kingdom and righteousness first. My mother was obviously impressed with the spirituality of this man who lived by faith. My father, not so easily impressed, summed up his opinion of the man with, "He's a bum."

I was also reminded of an article I had clipped out of Time magazine on the "Jesus Revolution." I read about Ed Wright, owner of the Sunset Surf Shop and principle apostle of the Christian Surfers. He told how Jesus adds a special dimension to the sport. In his surfing jargon he said, "It's so beautiful when you are with the Lord and catch a good ride. When you are piling out for the next one you just say, 'Thank you Lord for being so good to us and for the good waves and the good vibes.'" Another surfer sought Christ after he found the perfect wave in Hawaii and it failed to bring him happiness.

The text lends itself to many of these kinds of illustrations. It tells us that all our anxieties and cares will magically disappear if we have a religious experience, daily devotion, and go to church regularly, and moreover, we can have our cake and eat it too since we are promised "all those things which the Gentiles seek."

But there is some truth here. There has been many a person who has been grasped by the power of the Kingdom of God after finding dissatisfaction in everything else.

The nineteenth century Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, expressed this when he wrote, "I have looked in vain for an anchorage in the boundless sea of pleasure. But I left standing like a man who has rented a house and gathered all the furniture and household things together, but has not yet found the beloved with whom to share the joys and sorrows of his life."

- page 3 - "an awful joy"

But as I read that, I thought, "How beautifully he expresses himself." I almost wished that I could experience his despair and express it as well. I hardly considered advising him that he was seeking happiness in things when he should be seeking the Kingdom of God. Then I realized that had not Kierkegaard experienced this anxiety and despair no one would have ever heard of him. Who wants the Kingdom of God when you can achieve a place in history by wallowing in the slough of despond?

Sermons on this text tend to be trite and cheap, not because they are not true, but because they make the truth too foreign to the experience of most of us. Few of us have had the comparable experience of seeking happiness on a perfect wave in Hawaii. Few of us have experienced the despair of having all that Kierkegaard had without any satisfaction.

As I stopped to evaluate what I had prepared so far for this sermon, I made an enlightening discovery. I had been following good Reformed methodology in trying to understand the objective meaning of this text. I have tried to understand what is at the root of our anxiety. I have shown that Jesus is not urging a romantic irresponsibility. Rather he is defining the responsibility that God has taken upon himself to care for our needs and the reciprocal responsibility that we owe God as his children.

Then the awful thought hit me like a thunderbolt. Now that I understand, How am I going to respond to it? Is it enough to merely discover and communicate the truth?

So I turned myself to obeying what Christ had commanded. When I did this I soon realized that it is impossible for us to understand the meaning of this text until we have tried to obey it. It was then that I discovered that what this verse demands is too awful; too dreadful. By that I mean that I became filled with a dread and awe when I seriously considered whether I had been obeying it, and whether I intended to from there on.

But I was also surprised by joy. It's awfulness repulsed me, but its joy attracted me. Its meaning is filled with an awful joy which cannot be expressed without becoming melodramatic or understood until it is experienced.

I thought of the Word of God spoken through the prophet Jeremiah. "Ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your might." These words were spoken to the Jewish people in captivity in Babylon.

But the Christian church bears witness that the Jews did not seek with all their might, and I remembered the sad words of the Apostle Paul in the tenth chapter of Romans. "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God."

Then I thought of Psalm 14, whose message is even more awful. "The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one."

Its message is awful because we realize; we emphatically realize that what Christ commands of us, to seek his Kingdom and righteousness, we have not done. The command falls upon us with judgement. At our best, when we seek, we are like the men described by T.S. Eliot, "carnal, self-seeking as always before, selfish and purblind as ever before, Yet always struggling, always reaffirming, always resuming their march on the way that was lit by the light; Often halting, loitering, straying, delaying, returning, yet following no other way."

I was beginning to realize what Paul meant when he wrote, "It is a fearful thing (an awful thing) to fall into the hands of a living God."

If this command of Jesus does not come as a judgement on all of our goodness; if we find it easy to do what he demands, we have missed the whole thrust of the message. Is it possible that the dread; the judgement that this command contains can have anything that is good news for us? We know the awesomeness of this text. Where is the Joy?

It has been my experience that joy is never gained by seeking it. Rather we find ourselves to be surprised by joy. We experience it at times just when we seem to be farthest from it. Joy is something that is given to us. It is not something gained by our efforts. It was then that I realized that, although I had not sought first God's Kingdom and righteousness, that I had graciously received all those other things -- clothes, food, health, good books, good music, friends, and a leisure to enjoy them.

But that's the kind of God that Jesus was describing in this imagery of a father, son, and kingdom. We experience awe and dread when we compare our goodness with God's goodness. It's awesomeness is so great that it repulses me but it's inaccessibility, yet we experience joy when we realize that all these things we need have been given us.

God's kingdom and righteousness is like joy in that it is never within our power. It is only when we come to the end of our rope; when we realize that despite all of our seeking we have still fallen short, that we discover the joy of God's Kingdom. We experience God's grace.

The word that the Apostle's use for grace contains the root of two other words that help us to understand better what God's grace is. One word means "joy", the other means "a free gift". God's grace is experienced with joy when we realize that he has freely given us everything that we need and much more.

We discover that the Kingdom of God and his righteousness is God's and not ours. It is God who gives it and not we who build it or gain it by seeking. But this, I fear, we can never discover unless we have faced the awesomeness of the command to seek first his Kingdom.

The Kingdom of God is an awful joy. Just when the impossibility of our situation confronts us with its dread and anxiety, we discover that it has been given to us by the grace of God.