

“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?” My first thought on looking at the gospel reading for today was, “Thank God I don’t have to preach this in Haiti.” When you are living in absolute poverty, in a refugee camp without adequate shelter, adequate clothing, adequate food, adequate medicine and cholera is raging, it is a little hard not to worry. So, let’s look at what is unquestionably one of the best known, most beautifully phrased passages to be found in the New Testament and ask ourselves what Jesus was really saying in this part of his Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus tells us not to worry about earthly things, even those things that are core needs: food, shelter, clothing. He says that there are other things of far greater importance: righteousness, justice and mercy; things of the Kingdom. Strive first for the Kingdom of God; in other words, keep your values in perspective. Your highest value must be your relationship with God and for Christians that is a relationship bound, in baptism, to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Years ago, a Lutheran pastor told me about his younger years, before he came to America, the land of plenty. An ethnic German, he was born and spent his earlier years in Eastern Europe and fled west, before the advancing Russian army, towards the end of World War Two. He and his family lived, until they were able to immigrate to America, in a refugee camp, in which hunger was prevalent and there was a shortage of most necessities. His family was devoutly Christian and they prayed a lot about their situation. His father often spoke of this passage in Matthew’s gospel, trying to encourage the family to keep faith. Helmut, my friend, decided that something more than praying was in order and became an accomplished thief, stealing food and other necessities for himself and his family. He told me that it seemed to him that Jesus had never lived in a refugee camp or he would never have said not to worry about what you would eat.

It took some growing up, in maturity and in faith, for my friend to begin to recognize the true meaning of this passage and to find it a source of inspiration and faith. And, it was equally hard for him to come to the realization that stealing, even under those circumstances, was not the thing to do. What he had done, he came to understand, was to render even greater suffering on those from whom he stole, in order to alleviate his own, when the Christian call was to alleviate suffering not just for himself but for others.

Clearly Jesus was not indifferent to suffering and made very clear the Christian obligation to care for the needy: to feed the hungry, to cloth the naked, to show mercy and bring relief to those who are oppressed. Jesus knew well that suffering is a reality of life, and for many it is, and remains, the primary reality. So it is a given that Jesus did not downplay basic human needs when he said not to be anxious about food, clothing and shelter. Another reality is that this world in which we live has always been composed of those who have and those who have not. Natural wealth is not equally divided, and, when disaster strikes, even when it strikes across social class, the poor seem to suffer even more, and have fewer resources by which to cope. For far too many, life simply is not fair.

The first thing we must realize is that we cannot equate suffering as God’s punishment for sin. Suffering may be a ramification of sin, but it is inflicted by the sinner, not God. It follows, as I said earlier, that the Christian obligation is to alleviate human suffering in any way that we can. If we are materially comfortable, then our gospel passage tells us that we really need to focus on values, and

remember that we cannot serve two masters; we cannot serve God and wealth. Personal wealth has to be secondary to pursuit of the Kingdom of God, and the only way we can pursue the Kingdom is by loving justice, showing mercy and walking humbly with God.

Those who are not among the comfortable understandably worry about meeting their daily needs, but being needy is not license to put self above others and to lie, cheat and steal one's way to comfort. We live in a difficult world, but we serve God by serving others and doing all that we can to alleviate misery wherever and however we can. When we recall the immeasurable value that God places on all creation but most of all upon humanity, when we recall God's own sacrifice for us in Jesus Christ, and then determine that we will follow in our Savior's footsteps, we build the Kingdom for everyone.

*Amen.*