

Third Weekend of Advent (C/RCL): "Translating Worry Into Prayer"  
Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18  
December 13-14, 2018  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

One of my favorite Christmas cartoons is a picture of the stable in Bethlehem, with Mary & Joseph, animals and manger all in place, and a bubble caption overhead that reads, "It's a girl!" This weekend we light the pink candle on the wreath, but not because "It's a girl!" ☺ Pink is the color of joy and the third weekend of Advent is nicknamed "Gaudete," which means "Rejoice!" That word shows up in the first and second lessons, but not so much in the Gospel, which alarmingly begins, "You brood of vipers!"

John is telling the people gathered around that God doesn't care about religious **pedigree**: God cares about religious **practice**. Not just **participating** in worship but **living out** one's faith in daily life. He's a good, concrete preacher, talking about everyday things, addressing and steering people away from obvious temptations and potential professional pitfalls.

Interestingly, although all 4 evangelists are pretty much on the same page about John the Baptizer's message, it's only St. Luke who includes the specific advice to the tax collectors and soldiers, and only he who paints John exhorting the whole crowd, "*Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.*" (Luke 3:11) Maybe that's the most radical thing he says, and the hardest to put into practice: recognizing that many of the blessings that flow **to** us are meant to flow **through** us to others. Everything that **comes** to us isn't meant to **stay** with us. God uses us as channels, conduits, to route blessings to others. "Mine, all mine!" doesn't fly with God. "Radical generosity" does. That's true for us as individuals and also as a congregation. That's why we pass along 15% of all that we receive in undesignated offerings to our

Synod. In turn, the Synod passes along 50% of that to our national church body, the ELCA. Because one of our core values is generosity. Because one of our core beliefs is that we are blessed to be a blessing. Because we recognize that we enjoy many financial and spiritual blessings that other congregations and other corners of the Church don't. Because we believe our Lord's words elsewhere in St. Luke's Gospel:

*38 "[G]ive, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."* (Luke 6:38)

John encouraged the people in the crowd to be baptized as a sign of their willingness, "wantingness," to be forgiven of their sins and ever after to lead a renewed life of faith. So what does his message mean for those of us who are already baptized? Well, that's pretty much the same message **we** need to hear: that we are guilty of failures in love, of selfishness, of less-than-honest dealings in our professional and personal lives, of less-than-virtuous thoughts and words and deeds. We need to hear that our disobedience, our deceit, our distrust, our irreverence toward God and apathy toward our neighbor are dangerous and soul-stunting. In some cases our sins will suck the life right out of us. We need John's and Jesus' reminder to continually reorient ourselves **to** God and neighbor and **away from** self. We need to turn to God again, each day, like a flower that turns toward the light. **TURN TO GOD. RE-TURN TO GOD.** Simple 3 word summaries of John's message.

When we do that, when we turn or return to God, we open ourselves up to **joy**, the theme of the day. If we're out of sync with God, joy is sure to elude us. If we're setting our own agenda and making up the rules as we go, we **may** experience the passing happiness that creature comforts bring, but we're **not** going to enjoy the deep gladness of soul

communion with God and neighbor. Joy isn't vulnerable to external circumstances or threats. Joy is an inner state buffered from outer change.

That's why Paul, writing from a prison cell, charged with a capital offense which could (and did) result in his execution, could write to his church friends in Philippi:

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice... (Or, in The Message paraphrase):*

*<sup>4</sup> Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in him! ...<sup>6-7</sup> Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.*  
(Philippians 4:4, 6-7, *The Message*)

Worry is a form of fear, right? Fear of what **may** happen? Someone has said that faith and fear can't occupy the same space. It would be unrealistic to say we should never worry about anything. 'Not going to happen. **But** when we catch ourselves worrying we can certainly ask the Holy Spirit to turn our worry into prayer. Sleepless over something in particular? Finding yourself obsessing, coming up with worst case scenarios? "*Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray.*" Think of the loved one for whom you're fearful. Commend that person into the Lord's care over and over again, as many times as necessary for hope to replace dread, trust to replace terror.

Sometimes we're fearful **of** people, not fearful **for** them. In that case, an act of faith and of "radical generosity" is to pray for the person who terrifies us so. It's always a powerful gift to bring someone into the Lord's presence through prayer. But when we pray for someone we fear or dislike we're giving **ourselves** a gift as well. Take such folks to God and leave them there; it's an effective way to evict them from the "rent-free space in your brain" that they've been occupying.

A good spiritual exercise for Advent (or any time at all) is to do a little analysis of what and who we're worrying about. Are all my concerns about myself and those closest to me? Or am I expanding the circle of my concern, care, compassion to others? Maybe my turning to God means tuning into the suffering that I know exists but is removed from me geographically. Do I worry about the children starving in Yemen? When's the last time my heart broke on behalf of a stranger? Do I worry about things I **should** worry about? Are the things that make me worry **worth** worrying about? Someone has written,

It is a mark of... Christian maturity... to be able to distinguish between the anxiety [worry] that cripples and destroys the individual and the concern for others that builds up the whole community.<sup>1</sup>

It's a sign of spiritual growth when we worry more about others than ourselves – and when we translate worry into prayer. Once that happens, once **fruitless worry** becomes **purposeful prayer**, it's a pretty good bet we'll be inspired to take **fruitful action**. How legit is our prayer for daily bread if we're not willing to feed others? Can we pray for God's kingdom to come without being willing to play our part? Can we ask God to deliver us from evil, and then **not** do our best to deliver **others** from evil, when that's within our power? If we **turn (or re-turn) to God**, as John calls us to do, God is sure to **turn us toward our neighbor** as well. It's in communion with God **and** neighbor, sharing our blessings, working for justice, acting in mercy, that we find true joy. Amen

<sup>1</sup>New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. XI (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), p. 547.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

Remember: *It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.* It's also wonderful what happens when Christ **and** neighbor displace self at the center of our lives.