

Epiphany 8A Sermon 022711
Isaiah 49:8-16a; Psalm 131
1 Corinthians 4:1-5; Matthew 6:24-34

In the name of the only God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I saw a report on the evening news this week that – although not out of the ordinary, nor even especially shocking – really set me off. If you don't believe me, ask Donna. In a segment putatively devoted to "health news," Katie Curic looked earnestly and somewhat worriedly into the camera and, above a chyron asking whether or not cell phones caused brain cancer, read words very similar to this:

[In] a study of 47 cell phone users, scientists showed that a 50-minute cell call boosts metabolic activity in the region of the brain nearest the phone antenna. The preliminary study ... used high-tech imaging scans to track metabolism of the sugar glucose, which is considered a 'marker' of activity.

No one knows exactly what to make of the finding. ...

'Results of this study provide evidence that acute cell phone exposure affects brain metabolic activity,' the authors wrote, 'However, these results provide no information as to their relevance regarding potential carcinogenic effects (or lack of such effects) from chronic cell phone use.'¹

In other words, 47 people (out of the hundreds of millions who use them) had a cell phone turned on and stuck to their ears for almost an hour, while their brains were scanned to see if glucose levels changed near the site of the telephone. They never changed ears – they never even changed hands. They never said, "sorry, gotta call you back." and hung up. 50 minutes of a phone pressed up against one ear and guess what,

¹ http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504763_162-20035048-10391704.html?tag=latest

the levels DID change. And now that the scientists have that data – they have no idea what it means.

Now my problem with this exercise in “journalism” are legion. But I’ll sum them up this way: our modern American news media have ceased in any real and meaningful way to report the news. What passes for news today is a series of meaningless interviews and fluff pieces masquerading as investigative journalism. But worst of all, our media outlets spend a significant amount of time trying to outdo each other in the race to see who can scare the most people with the least possible amount of evidence.

It’s not just these silly medical “studies,” being published in ways that the scientists behind them never dreamed of. It’s also wall-to-wall coverage of the impending “bird flu” pandemic from a year ago. Every day, every media outlet screamed about how afraid we should all be. Then when (just as the Centers for Disease Control had said) the pandemic did not materialize, the media was off the story and on to the next possible message entitled: “Be afraid. Be very afraid.”

Since 9/11 our government and our media have all worked to keep the public afraid of the future. If it is not terrorism that we should fear, it’s disease. If it’s not disease, it’s economic collapse. If it’s not that, it’s communism, socialism, fascism – or some other scary sounding “ism.” Be afraid. Be very afraid.

In Matthew’s telling of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told His audience, “do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is

enough for today.” He said this in the context of people being worried about where their next meal would come from, not about whether or not their cell phone could increase metabolic activity in one small area of their brain. If He told His original audience not to worry about what they would wear, what they would eat, where they would sleep; what do you think He would say to us today – if we brought our “worries” to Him?

Jesus’ point then – a point He would almost certainly make more forcefully today – was that our heavenly Father created everything that is, and cares deeply about His creation. As Jesus said, “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” I believe that Jesus meant what He said that day. And I believe that we should start treating His words as if He really said what He meant.

The issue for Jesus that day, as it would be today, is that people spend so much time worrying about the relatively small things in life that they do not spend enough time on the important things. There is a saying in church-growth circles, that you’ll never succeed as long as you are “majoring in the minors.” That is what Jesus is talking about – majoring in the minors; concentrating on the unimportant while neglecting the vital.

He told His audience that if they would only “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, ... all these things (would) be given to (them) as well.” That is some advice that is pretty easy to take, if we only choose to do so. But keeping up with that advice can be as difficult as staying on an exercise program. Because just like

exercising, we know that it is good for us, but we have a lifetime of bad habits that we have to overcome in order to do what we know we should.

So how can you stop worrying about the inconsequential things and concentrate on the important things? Quite simply, by deciding to do so.

There is much to be afraid of right now – if you want to be afraid. The economy is still pretty iffy. The price of gas is going up while real wages are stagnating. Our schools need more money while the government promises less. Healthcare costs continue to spiral upward while politicians argue about how to arrange the schedule of their lobbyist visits. We are still in two wars in the Middle East – no matter what we're told. And on top of that, your Rector is leaving and you don't know what the future holds for the congregation.

Be afraid. Be very afraid. OR be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Just be a disciple.

You can choose to succumb to fear or you can choose to believe the Good News of the Gospel. I cannot make that choice for you. Nor can anyone else. But I can tell you how those two choices look.

If you believe what the media (and some of your brothers and sisters in Christ) tell you, you will spend all of your waking moments with sweaty palms, heart palpitations and indigestion. And you will have lots of waking moments because sleep will be difficult to come by. And in the end, after all is said and done, “can any of you by

worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” Of course the answer to Jesus’ question is, “No!” That is what it looks like to live in worry and fear. OR

You could strive first for the Kingdom of God and get out of bed every morning giving thanks for the blessings in your life (beginning with the fact that you were *able* to get out of bed and draw breath). You can take your worries and hand them over to Jesus – the one who offered to carry that burden for you. You can live a life surrounded by a loving God who calls you a beloved child and who promises never to leave your side, even when things get their hardest. And you can take the time and effort every day to enjoy the wonder of the world created for you by that loving God.

While Norman Vincent Peale’s 1952 book The Power of Positive Thinking has largely been dismissed in recent years for a multitude of valid reasons, there is a strong grain of truth in what Dr. Peale professed. One *can* make a conscious decision about one’s outlook on life. Jesus believed that faith in the Good News would result in a more positive outlook. But He also knew that people would have to make the *choice* to follow the Gospel message. And that is what He advocates in this morning’s reading.

Jesus never suggests that people should not take responsibility for themselves and their futures. He never suggests that we should live like the birds – not sowing or reaping – He just compares us positively to them with regard to our value to the Father. Jesus went out and did the work He was given to do every day, as did the Disciples. He always understood that we were called to be God’s hands, feet, eyes, ears and mouths in the

world. That suggests that we too have work to do. And work that is well done always involves some level of planning. Jesus was not against taking our work seriously. Instead, He was against us worrying or being anxious about such things, to the point that we became fixated on them.

Over the coming months there will be much around here for you to be anxious about. Resist the temptation. Remember that all such temptations come from a place other than the heart of Jesus. Gather together. Pray together. Plan together. Work together. Give thanks together. God is in your midst. Jesus is ready to take your anxieties and worries off your hands. The power of the Spirit is available for the asking.

BE Disciples of Jesus Christ, now and always. And even when things are scary, you'll be able to find joy – the joy of the message of the resurrected Christ here and now!
Amen.