

“Open Your Hand”

2 Corinthians 5: 1 – 10 & Mark 4: 26 – 28

Makemie Presbyterian

May 9, 2010 Mother's Day!

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling – if indeed, when we have taken it off we will not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord – for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

Mark 4: 26 – 28

He also said, (that is Jesus) “this is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain – first the stalk, then the ear, and then the grain in the ear.

This ends our reading from scripture this morning.

When my family moved from Alabama to Florida it was a big change for us. My dad had grown up farming in that dark-red clay and my mom was a Yankee, now free from reliving the Civil War on a weekly basis. At my parent’s house in Florida, there was a worrier and a gardener. The gardener was a pretty easygoing fellow. Every March or April he would come through the door with a brown paper sack full of seed packets and a couple of evenings later he was found pattering around the yard, emptying the packages into shallow furrows, heaping the dirt into little mounds and curling pieces of fence around them to keep the dogs out. Several weeks later, plants would appear in the strangest places. My dad was known to plant green peppers between the azalea bushes and basil by the mailbox. Every

year he was living in Florida he planted tomatoes in the rose garden and sweet pea vines wound through the Jacarandas. String beans climbed up and over the back fence of the house, and covered everything in sight like Virginia creeper.

All of this would drive the worrier crazy. She knew how gardens were supposed to be and she knew *this was not it*. First you test the soil; then you fertilize, mulch, weed, and water; above all you must worry, or else how will your garden grow?"

To my mom's eternal dismay and amazement, there would come a time every summer when the gardener would proclaim that the vegetables were ready. My dad would go out to collect them from all over the yard and in a little while the worrier sat down to a table heaped with this manna. Against her will and better judgment my mom had to admit that my dad had done all right, again, in spite of his refusal to worry. Some years there would even be plants that appeared out of nowhere, gifts from the earth itself.

This is what the kingdom of God is like, according to Mark. A man scatters seed on the ground and goes about his business, trusting the seed to sprout without his future interference, because the ground produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, the the full

grain in the ear. The Greek here is wonderful the ground is, literally, *automatic*. It produces of itself; it has within itself the power to make a seed become a plant, and so the kingdom of God is likened to automatic earth, earth that can be trusted to yield its fruit without any cheerleading, any manure, any worry on our part. The seed sprouts and grows, we know not how. Call it agricultural grace.

All right then, -- the automatic earth can be trusted – but what about our lives. There is nothing automatic about them. If we do not attend to it, manage it and yes, worry about it, we will fail at what we want to do, be found wanting at the end, die unsatisfied and unnoticed. Help! Saint Paul is right; in this earthly tent we do groan, do sigh with anxiety, but not exactly for the reasons he says.

When I first read today's lesson from 2 Corinthians out loud, I began nodding my head. "We know," Paul says, "that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed we have a building from God."

*Well, yes, we hope that. Can't be too presumptuous, after all, can't really know, but yes, a building to replace this tent sounds heavenly. "*

And yet we groan. And do we ever!

*And anxiety?*

“We sigh with anxiety.”

*What a mind reader; that is exactly what we do.*

Paul names the big worries, death and judgment, but we can fill in our own variations: war, cancer, poverty, divorce, addiction, an oil spill that we can't stop from pumping, another storm; pollution, the plunging stock market.

What is it that makes your heart chatter in your chest? What feeds your ulcer, makes your shoulder cramp, keeps you awake at night? Where are you busiest protecting yourself and those you love? Where does it seem as if there is ultimately no hope, and where is it in particular that you do not quite trust God to be God? Someone says, “Have faith!” and you want to break something, want to shout, “Faith is not enough!”

We live in an age of anxiety. To go back to the agricultural metaphor, we live between the time of planting and the harvest, and it is a time of great of uncertainty. We want to trust the automatic earth. We want to believe that what God has begun God will bring to fruition, but just in case God doesn't; we hedge our bets, doing everything we can think of to keep the anxiety at bay. Sometimes we call what we are doing “helping God out.”

Sure, we can trust God with our lives, but just to help God along we frequent the health food shop, the investment broker, the insurance agent, maybe even call the psychic hotline number that flashes on the TV screen late at night – just for fun – to see what’s ahead. Anything to batten down the hatches, to make the future look a little more secure.

But that is only one symptom of anxiety. There are lots more. Like *perfectionism*, the need to do everything exactly right, according to the book, so that there can be no doubt about our being in control. Or *driven ness*, that compulsion that turns all our “want to’s” into “have to’s,” that raises our demands on others and ourselves to a fever pitch. There is *moral outrage*, our insistence that we who have worked so hard have earned the right to judge others and to be protected from all harm, because bad things should not happen to good people. Or how about *restlessness*: the swinging foot, the tapping finger, the vague unease that says we should never be where we are but somewhere else instead. We cannot sleep, cannot sit still for long; got to keep moving, got to stay busy. Then there is *the dread of being alone*. Faced with the prospect of a night at home by ourselves, we get on the telephone and see what we can rustle up or,

failing that, settle into five or six hours of fellowship with the television set , Blu-ray or on-line. Along with that estrangement from self comes *estrangement from God*, where we buy books on spirituality but read mysteries instead. Or we mean to pray but it is hard to find the time and when we do we fall asleep. Sometimes it just seems as if there is nobody there.

Now, I am going to stop and use a short disclaimer. I am not in this sermon, preaching about the anxiety that comes unbidden as a result of the mind lurching out of control without our permission. The kind of anxiety that takes a skilled doctor to get under control. This sermon is not about that kind of anxiety. Now, I'll go on.

The word is anxiety, *angst* in German: a straight or narrow passage that restricts breathing; uneasiness or trouble of mind about some uncertain event, such as my life, my death, my relationship with God. Anxiety is so much a part of modern life that it seems an automatic occupational hazard of being a finite creature in a universe of infinite possibilities. But anxiety is more than that, more than just a quirk of my creatureliness to be taken for granted. Since my anxiety separates me from God, from other human beings, and from my own soul, I am prepared to call anxiety a sin, one that calls

for my repentance because it keeps me in limbo, telling me on one hand that I must work out my own salvation and on the other that I am doomed to fail. In short, what is absent when anxiety is present is faith – faith that God will be God, that the automatic earth will yield its fruit, that life can be trusted.

I am not of course, advocating that we all lie down under the nearest sycamore tree and watch the clouds go by, although that might not be a bad idea for most of us. Giving up anxiety does not mean giving up responsibility or concern, or the wish to live a productive life. But it does mean giving up our incessant, sterile worrying about what will become of us and our poisonous illusion that if we do stop worrying our lives will collapse. This is sin, and the remedy for it is twofold: first confession and then change, we make an amendment in our life. Do we desire to be saved from the sin of anxiety? Then we get on our knees and confess it. Confess everything we have tried to control, all the ways we have tried to manufacture our own security, all the times we have turned away from God in order to seek our own solutions. Confess what it has cost us, and how poorly it has worked to bring peace. Then ask for forgiveness, the forgiveness that is ours before we ask, and within the

freedom of that forgiveness amend our life. Make a different choice, a choice against anxiety, and live out of that choice for a change.

Saint Paul's word is as good as any: choose courage, which is not the absence of fear but the willingness to go on in spite of it. Choose to face your life, your death, your God, the dangerous unknown. Choose to face it without resorting to the old perfectionism, the old driven ness, the old restlessness and the old outrage. Choose courage, even knowing as you do that you cannot choose it once and for all, that if courage is what you want you must choose it over and over again, every day that you live, if real living is what you are after. That is what it takes. Confession and choice, forgiveness and courage, over and over, a new way of life.

Then scatter your seeds. Anxiety would have you keep them in your pocket, or plant them in small pots, or dig them up every day to see if they are growing. Courage allows you to open your hand and let them fly. They land where they land, and a few feed the birds, but many more fall into the ground. There in the dark, where you cannot see and do not know how, the automatic earth turns their death into life, pushing up through layers of dirt, through asphalt, through

concrete if necessary, through whatever is in its way – to rise up and grow and bloom.

Then it is our turn, we who have watched and waited faithfully, knowing we can't make the seed grow, knowing who can. It's our turn to harvest the seeds, to gather around the family table heaped with good things, to invite others to come & sit down and eat with us.

Amen.