

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
October 5, 2003

Can You Take It?

“And all these things will be given to you as well...”

~Matthew 6: 33

Preacher to Harvard Memorial Church and theologian Peter Gomes tells the story of a time he was asked to give the commencement talk at Brearly School in New York City. These girls' schools in New York are pretty tough places and pride themselves on significant distinction and achievement – not unlike this university in Palo Alto, CA. Brearly is a wonderful place Gomes reminisced, and he distinctly recalls the weekday morning he gave the talk at a Presbyterian Church, filled with anxious and proud parents, and anxious but somewhat relieved girls. Gomes took as his text the very gospel you just heard me read from Matthew, Chapter 6. “Therefore, do not be anxious about your life,” which he translated roughly as “relax.” He then went on, inviting them to take time to smell the roses, consider the lilies of the field, and so on. He thought it turned out to be a good talk for the occasion and was told such by the Brearly girls in attendance.

Recalls Gomes: One of the fathers, however, was not so pleased with what I had to say. He came up to me with the crazed look of a man who had paid one tuition bill too many, and he looked me dead in the eye and said, “That was utter nonsense, and not only was it utter nonsense, it was irresponsible nonsense. It was anxiety that got my daughter into Brearly, it was anxiety that got her through Brearly, it was anxiety that got her into Radcliffe, and it will be anxiety that will get her into the law firm of her choice.”

Gomes acknowledged this man had a problem and it wasn't just with him or his talk or with Jesus. In fact, Gomes admits he was ready to tell him “Oh get a life” and to stop using his daughter's life as his own, but that would have been rude. So instead, he elected to do something that would turn this parent into mush and said: ‘God bless you’ and left.

Anxiety, as Peter Gomes, this parent and many others have recognized, is a hard habit to break. There is, after all, plenty about which to be anxious. It has been suggested that even the weather is no longer a safe topic of conversation, with global warming and El Nino making it only another source of anxiety and turmoil.

Needless to say, I would presume that everyone in this chapel this morning has her or his own private preserve of anxiety. You bring here some trouble, pressure, concern, sadness, or fear that you simply cannot escape from. And although I absolutely love this time of year, a new academic beginning as the class of 2007 and returning students have arrived – I am also fully aware that the novelty is beginning to wear off – the rapid paces of New Student Orientation, the myriad of start-up events on campus, not to mention countless parties – all lead to the reality that course study lists are due tonight at midnight, classes are well underway, and the pragmatic advice that Dean McLennan gave last Sunday to eat well, exercise, and get plenty of sleep perhaps has gone out the window.

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So I've been thinking this week that maybe a bit of panic, anxiety, uncertainty is settling in for some of our students. Stanford made a mistake. They really should not have admitted me. I don't deserve to be here. I don't have what it takes. How will all the work get done? I don't have a major. Everyone that comes here knows exactly what he or she wants to do with his or her life. I'm a senior – what am I going to do with my Stanford education?

And the rest of us have other things on our mind that produces anxiety. Like taking ourselves to the polls on Tuesday and voting in a most absurd recall campaign. Or searching for that job that has seemed to be one disappointment after another. Or watching our government plunge us further into debt to hunt Iraq arms and clean up the mess we have made in that country and Afghanistan. Or wondering when the stalled economy will finally pull itself up by its bootstraps. It's all there, as well as a host of personal and professional issues we are facing.

Anxiety is indeed, a hard habit to break. But allow me to suggest, that as our gospel illustrates this morning, God is not indifferent to our anxieties nor does God dismiss them into some sort of utopian ideal that there is no such thing as anxiety. The needs in our lives – our concerns about the state of the world, the state of our health, the state of our soul – I believe are not unknown to God. How do you know, you might be wondering, oh finite human person in the pulpit?

Well, let's consider this. That it all might be a matter of priority and perspective. That Jesus, during his earthly ministry, was not indifferent or unaware of the anxieties that seemed to be plaguing his followers and those who sought his healing touch, his inspiring words, his comforting presence. Consequently, at the heart of the most important and systematic teaching in the gospel of Matthew we heard today – the Sermon on the Mount – which some would say is Jesus' most reflective and expanded utterance – we are admonished not to worry about the things we worry about, nor be defined by those worries and anxieties. We are told to focus on God and that if we give the Divine, the Holy, God – priority – we will gain perspective and everything else will fall into place.

Now before you tune me out completely because this seems so simplistic or lacking in theological discourse – let me say that this is not what I want you to remember when you walk out the door this morning. Rather, I want you to remember that one of the real things that will fall into place is how much we will realize we have already been given. How blessed we are at this very moment, how richly endowed we are in God. As the psalmist said, and Lee read for us from Psalm 103: “My soul, O God, is for your blessing, and all that is within me is a blessing for your nameless holiness. My soul, O God is for your blessing and remembers your gifts, forgets not your benefits.”

It has been suggested that we who call ourselves - people of God, believers, Christians, spiritual practitioners, however else you might refer to yourself - suffer not only from anxiety, but also from amnesia, forgetting the blessings, the benefits of God. That people in other religious traditions observe that on the basis of what we say and how we

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act – we are a religious people driven by our anxieties. That the fuel of our faith or practice is what we are worried about. That we are united often by the frowns in our foreheads. That what we pray for may become a laundry list of sorts of what we need, from what we ask to be spared, or with what we need help to get through. That is not to say that we cannot make our needs known and indeed pray for them, but perhaps the point is that to realign our priorities or to gain perspective (as the gospel so admonishes today) requires a reordering of the way we think, an attitude adjustment if you will.

Peter Gomes suggests one way to begin to make this adjustment, a way to refocus our spiritual energy, is to consider not what we need as the beginning point of our spiritual lives, but what we have received. This sounds very simple, Gomes admits, but from his own experience and others he has learned that the point of our beginning is usually what we lack, what we want, what we desire, rather than what we have, what we have received, and how we ought to respond initially to those blessings. We are meant to consider not what we want God to do for us or even what we want to be able to do for God or for ourselves or for others, but rather what God has done and is doing for us, to which we can testify with our lips AND with our lives.

Consequently, I, you, have Peter Gomes to thank this morning for the insertion of the General Thanksgiving immediately following the Prayers of the People. He, as the preacher and chaplain to Harvard University, uses it in worship at Harvard Memorial Church to remind the gathered community that no matter where or who they are on Sunday morning, what they bring to God's Holy Table, how and where their hearts have been dragged through the mire and have come with heavy burdens – they will not neglect in their public worship to give thanks to God.

“We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life”...we will pray together in just a few moments in our order of service. We bless God for the fact that we are. We may not be what we used to be, we may not be what we are going to be, but we are, and that is the number one source for blessing and thanksgiving. “We bless

you for our creation, for our preservation”...You're still here. We're still here. Not only are we, but we still are. We have been spared.

Can you take it?

This is why I also decided to talk about blessing this morning, with the hopes it be the one small point you recall from this sermon as you walk out the door and face the new week ahead. How do we respond to the blessings of God in our lives and *can we take it?* – accept those blessings we have done nothing for frankly. This is hard for our

overachieving souls. This is hard for us who live in a pocket of wealth and affluence. This is hard for us who work, teach, study and learn at one of the finest academic institutions in the world. This is hard for us who think we should talk more about how as

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those blessed we ought to consider how we take blessing and become a blessing to others. You are right. But that is another sermon for another day.

The concept of blessing is hard. Many of us have problems with it. Why?

I'll borrow three reasons that Gomes and others illuminated for me, very briefly and concisely.

1. We find it easier to believe bad news rather than good news. Bad news we equate with reality; good news we regard as the exception to the rule. When good news comes we are incredulous: "How can this be?" We expect bad news and therefore are not altogether convinced when good news comes our way. For example: "I got a B" is usually said without a great deal of satisfaction. "She gave me an A" is said as though you don't deserve it.
2. Anxiety is a human habit and a hard one to break as I mentioned earlier. This is what preserves us, what keeps us going on, and some would say keeps mothers in business. God doesn't have time to worry about everything, so mothers were invented. Those who take time to smell the roses usually take longer to graduate than those who do
3. not. Those who consider the lilies of the field have little time shake the earth and will never own the field; those who are anxious but not willing to consider blessings are determined to make blessings happen, fueled by anxiety.
4. Blessing properly received requires a sense of gratitude, and gratitude often places us in a relationship of obligation. In the language of deconstruction, it is a power relationship. If I do something kind and gracious for you, it is because I want to exercise power over you. This is why people get anxious when other people do little acts of kindness: they know it is weaving a chain of obligation, indebtedness and powerlessness. Unfortunately, they become remembered in this cynical world as a form of moral manipulation or power trip. Blessing is also like a contract. That is, if we are good, we will get. A blessing, in essence, is seen as a reward for services rendered.

So for these and many other reasons it may be easier to address God with our anxieties, our fears, our needs, our concerns rather than to stand in thanksgiving for our blessings. Perhaps we need remember that blessings are ways in which God may allow us to glimpse the Holy, and to gain such a perspective, such a view of God and of ourselves we may realize we have no basic reason to be anxious – that indeed all will take its rightful place. A blessing is a means to realize who God is and is not – and who we are to be so beloved of God.

Further, to speak of a person as blessed is to acknowledge the presence of the Holy in that person, and in that person's life. God is with you, in you, for you. When we say, "May

God be with you", at different times in this service, we mean that God's presence in your life is a sign of God's blessing. "May God be with you, and also with you"...to be

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blessed is in the first place an acknowledgement of the presence of God in your life and in your place, and in others lives and places.

Thinking this way, we might consider focusing on the place in our lives where we have known and sensed the presence and power of the Holy. Can you think of some of your

own daily little preservations, perhaps the little hints of God's presence? A wonderful piece of music, an exceptional insight, a delightfully tasty meal in the presence of friends, an extraordinary sunset or sunrise. The presences not just out there, but in our lives. We have our creation, our preservation, and all the blessings of this life for which to be grateful.

A blessing may be also be what God hopes for us, what God desires for us in matters great and small. It is not an extraordinary thing to consider that God's desire is that good things should happen to us and that perhaps more than anything have we should have an awareness of the good things that have already been provided for us. In an increasingly cynical, troublesome and fearful world, I dare say this awareness could be a sign of increasing spiritual growth and maturity. "My soul, O God, is for your blessing. Help me not to forget your gifts."

As she was nearing the end of her days, my grandmother came to live with us. Having emigrated from Ireland, she had seen and done great things. Everything she had was brought in two suitcases, after some 83 years of life. She had photographs, some mementos, assorted clothing and two pairs of shoes. She also had her novenas, which she had faithfully prayed for years and years every day. In her mid 40's, she became gravely ill, a time during which my mother and her siblings had cared for her round the clock. She knew what it was to be blessed because she had not forgotten all of the benefits of her God. Out of her scarcity, then and during her time with us at 83, she had her perspective in order, her priorities in order as I watched her daily pray her novenas, whistle tunes incessantly, and greet me gleefully at the door when I came home from school. She sought first God's holy reign and goodness, and all else had been taken care of.

In a moment, we will stand and sing together "Great is Your Faithfulness, O God, Creator, with you no shadow of turning we see. You do not change, your compassions they fail

not; all of your goodness forever will be. Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, blessings all mine with ten thousand beside."

Dear friends, this morning, stop, and if only briefly – consider what God does, has done and is doing through us, with us, and for us. Blessing – yours and mine – is the word for life. **Can you take it?**

With thanks and acknowledgement to The Rev. Peter Gomes, Harvard Memorial Church