

Transcript of Bishop James Hazelwood's Sermon
For November 2021 Worship
Joel 2:21-27, Matthew 6:25-33

Good morning saints! Good morning sinners! I'm glad we're all here.

This past week I had an experience that connects with these texts. I was at a nearby Panera waiting with several people to place my order when a young teenage boy who was clearly a trainee at the program there at Panera Bread was talking with what seemed like the manager. I couldn't hear exactly what was said leading up to this, but the last statement he said was "I have anxiety." The manager being rather overly advising and maybe parental said "Oh you should take such and such (naming some kind of herbal supplement). It works for anxiety." I watched the expression on the young man's face and it was clear that was not what he was looking for. He was looking for acknowledgement that he has anxiety.

Who doesn't have anxiety? Actually about 20% of Americans, 1 in 5, have general anxiety disorder. Including yours truly. But all of us, including the other 80% experience anxiety from time to time. Anxiety just seems prevalent in our culture. We live in an age of anxiety, in an age of much turmoil. And it's particularly challenging because we also live in a time when we are bombarded by images from various forms of media that suggest that the antidote to anxiety is more: more clothing, more food, more cars, more status, more housing. And I wonder if that is the case.

About 8 years ago there was research done on Americans in terms of income and anxiety. What they found is that when people had an annual income of about \$70,000 a year, going up to that, if you increased their income up to \$70,000 their level of anxiety went down and their sense of well being, their confidence went up. But after about \$70,000 a year, more made no difference. That tells us something important about living in an economic society that is profoundly based on consumer capitalism. In other words, enough does address anxiety.

Now is all this what Jesus was talking about in that gospel lesson? I'm not so sure. I'm also not so sure that Jesus was speaking directly to people today who have general anxiety disorder. Because if you listen carefully with a 21st century mind, what you're hearing Jesus say is some kind of pop culture advice. "Well, you've got anxiety? Don't worry. Here, just take this herbal supplement," as the manager at the Panera said to that young man.

But I don't think that's what Jesus is driving at here. I think he's pushing us further into a different understanding, a different consciousness. Notice that as this teaching unfolds in the context of the sermon on the mount, this advice of do not worry – where is all of the inoculation for anxiety, the pandemic of anxiety? It always leads towards things of nature – talks of birds, of lilies of the valley, the grasses of the field. In other words, Jesus is trying to reorient the listener away from the general concern, the worry of will we have enough to eat, will we have a place to sleep, will we have enough clothing. Trying to move us away from worry about that and into a framework of understanding how nature, the environment works, using the examples of birds and lilies and grass.

Jesus is also connecting with our Old Testament lesson from the book of Joel. If you read them carefully side-by-side, you'll say, "Aaahh...I get it. This is where Jesus, who was very

knowledgeable about the scriptures as a rabbi of his day, would have pulled from the book of Joel and that reading we heard earlier.”

I think there is a hint here for us in terms of anxiety. There is the gift of thanksgiving. If you look at these texts it's not only a connection to the natural world, how the natural world deals with worry, but there is a sense underlying it all that thanksgiving might be the antidote. That gratitude might be the way forward. Just this morning in my email inbox I received one of those email newsletters from somebody, and it showed a cartoon. The cartoon shows two windows that are open. A long line of people standing near the complaint window. Then right next to it, nobody in line for the gratitude window.

Years ago, I had an experience where no matter how much gratitude I expressed it wouldn't have been enough. I was in Chicago for the Conference of Bishops and unfortunately, I came down with a really bad case of the stomach flu. I was literally in my hotel room for 24 hours by myself. I called the front desk and alerted them not to send the maid. But this maid did something different. She came and knocked on my door and she carefully and tenderly brought soda crackers and ginger ale and just slid them right in. It was a wonderful gift. It was a gift of caring. I was full of gratitude. Now I typically don't carry cash with me anymore, but I went out to the ATM and I left her a very large tip. I never saw her; it was an anonymous gift of kindness.

Now, was I concerned about many things? Was I worried at that particular moment? Yes. You can imagine. But she provided some solace. I've thought about that incident a lot especially as I satay in a hotel, so I try to practice consistent acts of gratitude. There is something in the act of being thankful, of being grateful – and not thinking it but acting on it, that changes not only the recipient but it changes me. When I am grateful, when I am in a space of gratitude, I am changed.

I think that ultimately this is the lesson that Jesus is trying to encourage us to consider. We, of course, have this wonderful opportunity: we experience gratitude because we are the recipients of God's grace, through Christ on the cross and risen on Easter. Such a gift!

But as Martin Marty, the American theologian and historian, once said, “It's not what we *got* to do, it's what we *get* to do that makes the difference.” In other words, we don't extend gratitude to others because we have to, we do it because we get to do it. That changes us. It changes the world when Christ comes through us to other people.

So, we have this opportunity. Let's extend some gratitude!