

Thomas Payden
First Congregational UCC, South Milwaukee
February 27, 2011

Be Not Anxious

If I make you angry or upset today, remember that I take quite seriously the image I raised in this week's Bell Tower—that of staying at the same table with each other. If we are of differing opinions, I challenge and encourage you to stay at the table so we can continue talking. If there is any integrity in the language of seeing the church as a community, then it must be made visible in the midst of *difficult* conversations just as surely as we see it in the course of *comfortable* conversations. If we differ, then I pray for you to have the strength to stay at the table with me, and for me to have the strength to stay at the table with you.

I cannot come here today and say nothing about the political struggles that have been swirling in Madison and across this State in these past weeks. And that is not because I feel compelled to add my voice to one side of the current debate or the other, but because God saw fit to put the words of Matthew 6 in front of us this week.

With words like:

You cannot serve God and wealth.

and

Do not worry about your life. (or Be not anxious about your life.)

and

Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well—

with words like those

my mind and my heart keep asking the question “Where is the Gospel in all that we are seeing?”

Striving first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness calls us to go to extraordinary lengths to care for, and even love, one another. It was disingenuous, at the very least, of the Governor to include the erasing of the vast majority of the collective bargaining rights of State workers in a budget that he expected to be voted on in the matter of less than a week. Despite his claim to the contrary, I have seen no evidence that such a policy expectation was a part of his campaign in the Governor's race this past year. To make such a momentous and surprising proposal leads me to question the Governor's level of understanding about state workers and his compassion for them. I am very sympathetic toward those represented by the thousands who have been demonstrating in Madison and other parts of the State in these weeks.

My sympathies are not completely one-sided, however.

Both testaments of our Scripture call for the compassionate and just exercise of power. Judgment about this is pronounced on both those who are seen as insiders to the family of God

and those who are deemed to be on the outside of that family. Unions grew as a means to insure the rights of workers in those situations where employers alone would not attend to such rights. As such, unions have come to wield a significant amount of power in our society. It is incumbent upon such entities to exercise that power with justice—to negotiate toward agreements that recognize far more than self-interest, not simply because they can, but because they should.

“Be not anxious” seemed ludicrous to me as I read it this week!

We are talking about livelihoods in common Wisconsin families and homes. Be not anxious!
We are talking about a \$3 billion shortfall in coming years in this State. Be not anxious!

AND beyond Wisconsin...

We are talking about terrorism that lies in wait and planning for years in a Texas town. Be not anxious!

We are talking about rising commodities prices from oil to cotton to vegetables or metal to wood. Be not anxious!

We are talking about higher costs for education and lower levels of assistance funding. Be not anxious!

We are talking about health care costs that far out-strip the inflation rates upon which a great number of wage increases are based. Be not anxious!

And we all wonder, “How?”

Not being anxious is a conscious choice—the choice of not allowing worry to establish the game plan for our energies and our actions. When I am worried, I cannot hear you, I cannot talk to you, I cannot care about you. My world is my only concern. Present your view of the world as rationally and reasonably as you might, but if it does not fit into my view of my worry-filled world, I don’t care; I cannot care.

There are a lot of people and systems who want us to be anxious. Advertisers want us to be anxious, because anxious people will spend almost anything to buy that which promises to fix that which those same advertisers have just convinced us is wrong with us. The Pentagon wants us to be anxious, because our anxiety will not allow us to raise serious questions about why we need to have a military budget that is greater than the military budgets of the next 20 countries’ expenditures combined! Decision makers in Washington were delighted with our anxiety after 9-11 because we so willingly gave away incredible personal liberties without a whimper with the Patriot Act.

The choice not to be anxious begins in our ability to pay attention to the things that God pays attention to. The Gospel sets our priorities. Strive FIRST for the kingdom of God.... You cannot serve God and wealth. If you aren’t ready to concede that money is the root of all evil, you might at least agree that money is the source of a great many of our anxieties. We are a people over whom money has a great deal of power. We have allowed it to become a comfort for us and a source of great security, not only for today, but also for our future. We have lost touch with the Provision of God, and by that I do not mean some pie-in-the-sky understanding

that God will somehow, magically make everything we need show up on our front porch every morning. What I do mean is that fundamental trusting in the Promises of God is transforming of ourselves and the world—our priority is act in ways that make visible the faith that God has brought to light in Jesus Christ:

That love is more productive than hate.
That joy is more productive than despondency and cynicism.
That peace is more productive than animosity and discord.
That patience is more productive than impatience.
That kindness is more productive than hard-heartedness.
That generosity is more productive than selfish clutching.
That goodness is more productive than meanness.
That faithfulness is more productive than the dismissing of faith.
That self-control is more productive than the lack of restraint.

My interest is not in having us known as the State that “is open for business.”

I want us to be known as the State
Where children are fed;
Where prejudice is pushed aside;
Where people are sheltered;
Where education for everyone is our hallmark.

I want us to be known as the State where God is seen to be at work in our every conversation and in our every decision.

Be not anxious?!

There is a way, and it is just waiting for us to believe.