

A Dollar Short June 1, 2008

You may have heard the story about the man who was dying, with his wife of many years right by his bedside. As he tried to share his final thoughts in his now raspy voice, he said to her: "You were with me when I lost my job," and she nodded and said, "Yes, I was." Then he said, "You were with me when we lost the house," and again she nodded that she was there. "You were with me when we had to declare bankruptcy," he said. She replied that yes, of course, she was there. His eyes flickering open, he looked at her, and said, "I think you're bad luck!"

Frankly, I doubt that she was bad luck, but when we hear the litany of things gone wrong, it could be easy to go there. Now, I heard that story some years ago, but it seems that it could be especially true today. In case you haven't noticed, we're in some pretty tough economic times right now. In fact, most of us are probably aware of homes that are in foreclosure right this minute. There have been two in our neighborhood, and it's quite obvious just how painful and difficult that is for the families that lived in those homes.

The reality is that this is not just happening in our neighborhood, but it's going on everywhere. I recently read some statistics that are pretty overwhelming. For instance, I read that, from 2005 to 2006, national foreclosures increased 38%, with some states faring far worse than that. Indiana was one of those states, with a 110% increase in that same time span. That means that one out of every 165 households in this state was in foreclosure.

2007 statistics appear to be even worse. CNNMoney.com reported that foreclosures were up by 75% that year compared to 2006. That meant that more than 1% of homes were in a process of foreclosure, and that was an increase from the prior year of .58%.

The number of foreclosures is daunting, but that's not the only thing with which folks are dealing. The nation's unemployment rate is at 5.1%, and is expected to go higher. We all know how high gas prices are, and that is affecting almost everything else, including food and normal household items. Things are grim wherever we look.

Living in times like these can be very difficult for people, and stress, anxiety, worry and concern are rampant. Stressed out workers are not usually very productive, and so businesses and companies suffer, too. Workers dealing with personal financial crisis tend to be preoccupied and have difficulty concentrating, and when we're in that situation, we often do all the wrong things. We eat the wrong things; we don't get enough rest; exercise is the first thing to go. We try to soothe our worries with chocolate or other good, but not so good for you foods, or we indulge in other destructive behaviors, such as excessive smoking, drinking, staying out late, and more.

While that kind of thing may offer us temporary escape from our troubles, it really complicates the situation more than it helps. Nothing gets better when we try to run from it, get heavy into denial, or fail to face the facts. Instead of working to resolve the issues, we often make ourselves sick worrying about one thing or another, and always, always, fearing the worst.

The problem with worry is that it is a wasted activity. Someone has said, "If it's not worth praying about, it's not worth worrying about." We may spend all our time worrying and fretting about what's going on, but that doesn't really get us anywhere. That's basically what our Bible passage is trying to help us understand. Now the writer is Paul, and he is writing words of encouragement and support to the Philippians who lived in the city of Philippi in what we now refer to as the north of Greece. Our Bible passage reads like this:

"Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life."

I think what Paul wants his readers to take from this is that we can share anything and everything with God. We can pour out our worries, our cares, all the things we're frustrated or concerned about, and God will hear us. If we do this, it's really a way of letting go of all the things that weigh us down, and that in and of itself, has a way of lightening our burdens.

A speaker once highlighted the importance of letting go of our concerns and stresses when addressing an audience. He raised a glass of water and asked, "How heavy is this glass of water?" The answers ranged anywhere from 9 ounces to 20 ounces, but the speaker responded that the actual weight didn't really matter. He told them that it all depended on how long he tried to hold the glass how heavy it was.

He said, "If I hold it for a minute, that's not a problem. If I hold it for an hour, I'll have an ache in my right arm. If I hold it for a day, you'll have to call an ambulance. In each case, it's the same weight, but the longer I hold it, the heavier it becomes." The longer we hold onto our troubles, the more they will weigh us down. We have to learn to share them with God, and then really let them go.

Part of the problem with worrying so much is that most of the time we're worrying about things over which we have little or no control. One of you shared with me something your grandmother had said to you. She said, "Either there is something you can do about it, or there is not. If there is something you can do about it, do it! If there is nothing you can do about it, why worry about it?" In my mind, that's good advice.

When we can let go of our worrying and put ourselves in God's hands, I'm convinced God will lead us forward in helpful, positive ways. We just may discover that we want to do the kind of things that are good for us and to us. What are some of those things?

I know they're not new for any of us; it's just a matter of getting ourselves free enough from our problems to be able to practice them. But assuming we're all willing to do that, I'd like to share some practical hints that just might help us deal with these tough economic times in healthier ways.

We all know that we should eat right and get the proper amount of rest. Coupling those behaviors with a little exercise can give us a greater sense of control and calm, and being in better health can even inspire new ideas and allow us to see doors opening that we had assumed were closed. Taking the healthy route may include little things like grabbing a 10 minute walk over the lunch hour; taking short, frequent breaks from our work can help us re-group. Laying off the caffeine we consume in coffee, tea, soda and chocolate can help calm our nerves. Being healthier can give us the energy we need to look at the facts of our situation and to think clearly and calmly enough to see the steps we need to take to remedy the situation.

Now, those are pretty specific. However, the speaker who talked about holding the glass of water, had some interesting thoughts to share with his audience about some perspectives on life that we might all find helpful. Here's some of what he had to say:

Accept that some days you're the pigeon, and some days the statue.

Always keep your words soft and sweet, just in case you have to eat them.

Nobody cares if you can't dance well. Just get up and dance.

Birthdays are good for you. The more you have the longer you live.

A truly happy person is one who can enjoy the scenery on a detour.

Pray.

The speaker had more to say, but I really think those are some good pieces of advice, if we want to live as healthier, happier people. I especially like the last one, and personally, I believe we'd all be better off if we put praying first instead of last on our list.

If we can focus on praying to God instead of worrying ourselves silly, we just might be able to get our minds clear enough to discover that sense of wholeness that Paul talked about in our Bible passage—that sense of realizing that God can bring good even out of the worst of circumstances. That sense of wholeness, that sense of peace, can be ours when we're willing to share openly and honestly with God.

When we do that, we will know that we are not alone in our struggles; God cares and is walking with us, and will give us the strength, wisdom, insight and courage to face whatever comes our way. I know that's true.

Closing:

The reality is that we're facing some pretty tough economic times right now, and it's easy for things to get out of whack in our lives. Money troubles are difficult for many of us, but maybe it will help if we remember

something that John Ruskin once wrote: "There is no wealth but life." We are rich because we have God's gift of life; no one can foreclose on that!

Have a great Sunday and go in peace. Amen.