

Homily  
Genesis 24: 34-38, 42-49, 58-67  
Romans 7:15-25a  
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30  
July 9, 2017

Good morning. A few weeks ago, I came across a CD our girls Natalie and Mallory had made years ago. It was a collection of songs including one from Disney's "The Lion King." The title of the track is "Hakuna Matata!" In Swahili the words mean, "No worries." The song is sung by a meerkat named Timon and a warthog named Pumbaa to a young lion named Simba. Here's how it goes:

Hakuna Matata!

What a wonderful phrase

Hakuna Matata!

Ain't no passing craze

It means no worries

For the rest of your days

It's our problem-free philosophy

Hakuna Matata!

Hakuna Matata. No worries for the rest of your days . . . mmm . . . wouldn't that be nice?

Who can say they have "no worries" for the rest of their days? How about the people in the Bible? How about Abraham?

For the past month, our Old Testament first reading has followed Abraham and his family. We began with Sarah his wife, ninety-years of age, giving birth to Isaac; moved to Abraham casting out Hagar, with whom he fathered Ismael (and from whom, by the way the prophet Muhammed descended); and last week, we followed Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac at the altar. Today, we hear of Abraham, then living in Canaan, sending his servant back to his homeland to find a wife for his son Isaac. It is tempting to think that the purpose of this story is

simply to establish a genealogical link: from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to the twelve tribes of Israel, and finally to Jesus.

Yet I see a back story here. Isaac was 40 years old; he was living at home; and he was an only child. Not only was Isaac an only child, he was the only child of a woman who had waited seventy-five years to have a baby. Do we think Sarah loved him? Yes, we, do. Do we think Isaac was a momma's boy? Most certainly. That's the back story: Isaac was a momma's boy, his mom had just died, Isaac needed comforting, and Abraham was not about to take care of his 40-year-old kid. No worries? You bet Abraham was worried: Isaac's unhappiness affected Abraham. As any parent will tell you, you are only as happy as your unhappiest child.

What about St. Paul? Paul is one of Christ's first followers. His writings predate the Gospels and many of his words are in the liturgy we use today. At the time of his letter to the Romans, Paul travelled to Thessalonica and Corinth in Greece, and to Galatia in modern Turkey. He was 51 years old, plus or minus, old by biblical standards, old enough to have become and to have matured into himself. Yet, astonishingly, he writes: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." He calls himself "a wretched man." Paul is not living as he wants to live and is clearly troubled by this.

Paul's reflection reminds me of a priest named Father Mike Coram who served here at Epiphany a while back. When Mike preached, he walked back and forth, forth and back, in the middle of the church. He was prone to dramatic hand gestures, bring his hands together or apart to make point, at times knocking things over on the altar. One of his sermons continues to swirl within me. One Sunday he asked, "Am I living the life I want to live, and if not, why not?" Let me repeat this: "Am I living the life I want to live, and if not, why not?" To ask the question is to receive a blessing and a curse. A blessing because of the light of awareness the question brings to life, a curse because the light of awareness does not dim. If we are not living the life we want to live, what are we doing? Should we be worried?

Okay, then, how about King David? David played a harp – aren't all musicians problem free? Hardly. His Psalms span the distance between the darkness of despair and the light of hope, often in just a few stanzas. This is from Psalm 13, one of last week's readings, "How long, O

LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" While the Psalm ends with hope, "But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation," David's pain in longing for an absent God is palpable and real.

Is there any way to have a life that is worry-free or problem free? Not so, it seems. The conditions of existence are birth, yes, but also death; joy, yes, but also suffering; youth and vitality, yes, but also old age and enervation; good health but also sickness. There's a story about a man who came to see the Buddha because he hoped the Buddha could help him with his problems. He told the Buddha that he was a farmer. "I like farming," he said, "but sometimes it doesn't rain enough, and my crops fail." "I'm married too," said the man. "She's a good wife... I love her in fact. But sometimes she nags me too much." "I have kids," said the man. "Good kids, too... but sometimes they don't show me enough respect. And sometime . . . . The man went on like this, laying out his difficulties and worries. When he had gotten finished, he had counted out 83 problems. He looked to the Buddha for help.

The Buddha said, "I can't help you."

"What do you mean?" said the man.

"Everybody's got problems." said the Buddha. "In fact, we've all got 83 problems. Each one of us. And we can't do anything about them. For example, you're going to lose your loved ones eventually. And you're going to die someday. And there's nothing you or I, or anyone else, can do about it."

The man became furious. "I thought you were a great teacher" he shouted. The Buddha said, "Well, I can help you with your 84th problem." The 84th problem?" said the man. "What's that?" Said the Buddha "That you do not want to have 83 problems."

We will always have 83 problems. When one is solved, another will pop up. That is just the way it is. Not even Jesus thought otherwise. He came close, in his Sermon on the Mount, when he said, "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." I remember these words often and focus not worrying about tomorrow, for I do think it is useless to worry about tomorrow. Until this past week,

though, I had not thought of his words for today, "Each day has enough troubles of its own." Yes, it does. So, if it feels as though you are troubled, if it feels as though you have worries, take heart. The Master, Jesus, knows this. But unlike the Buddha, Jesus tells us that there is something we can do about our troubles. We can bring our them to Him.

Patty my wife works for Johns Hopkins Health Care, a part of the Johns Hopkins Medical System. (By the way, it's Johns with an "s," not John – trust me, this is the only thing you will remember from this homily). At Johns Hopkins Hospital, at the main Broadway entrance in the Rotunda, there is a three-foot pedestal, and on this pedestal, a ten and one-half foot statue of the Risen Christ Jesus. Known as Christ the Consoler, this remarkable figure stands with open arms, outstretched hands, and deep nail marks in his hands and feet. The base of the statue bears the inscription from today's Gospel: -- "COME unto ME All Ye That Are Weary And Heavy Laden And I Will Give You REST."

We may wonder how or why a religious statute is at the entrance to a non-religious hospital especially since the founder Johns Hopkins (with an "s") who, though he was a Quaker, was determined to establish a non-sectarian university, hospital and medical school. In 19th century Baltimore, though, many people felt otherwise, so much so that that when the University was dedicated in 1876 without so much as a benediction, many Baltimoreans considered it blasphemous. Finally, twenty years later, in 1896, the University's first president, Daniel Gilman brought in the statue of Christ the Consoler. But even to Gilman, the statue was not religious but represented Jesus as the ultimate physician, the "Great Healer."

Gilman would be surprised to learn that the statute he regarded as a great physician became, as one reporter said, a "spiritual touchstone" for all who encounter it. For decades people have reached out and rubbed or touched the feet at the base. Sometime in the early 1990s, people began to leave prayers written on scraps of paper or the back of visitor's badges or business cards at the statue's base. To create a place for the prayers, hospital chaplains placed a blank book on a stand by the statue. It is filled with prayers every two to three months. Anyone entering or leaving the hospital can write in the prayer book and/or read the prayers

other people have written. People write prayers longhand, filling the pages with words and sketches. Some leave photographs, children's drawings, flowers, and coins.

A graduate student, Wendy Cage, analyzed the prayers written in these books between 1999 and 2005. Here is what she found.

As a group, she wrote, these prayer writers conceive of God as accessible, as actively listening, and as a source of support. They begin prayers with *Dear, Hello* or *Hey* and sign them with their name or initials, almost like e-mails. *Dear God, Thank you for everything.* Some make immediate requests and others thank God for listening; *Sweet Jesus, Thank you for listening.* The word *love* is common, *We lift up N. to you, heal her heart and Help P. and her boys cope... I love you. Love, M.* Many of these prayers, she says, read as snippets of ongoing conversations between the writers and God. What these prayers rarely do is to ask an all-powerful God to cure an incurable condition. Nor do they ask for specific outcomes. Rather than ask God to heal a broken leg, for example, they ask God to give them the "strength" to get through a difficult time.

COME unto ME All Ye That Are Weary And Heavy Laden And I Will Give You REST." The patients and families who encounter Christ the Consoler at Johns Hopkins Hospital do not pass by without touching the statue, do not pass by without touching and being touched by Jesus. Nor should we pass by the words of the Gospel today without touching and being touched by them. Yes, life is difficult and yes, we will always have 83 problems. But there is something we can do with them. We can lay them at the feet of Christ the Consoler, we who are weary and are heavy laden, and He will give us rest. This is a problem-free philosophy. Hakuna Matata.

Amen.