

October 10, 2021
Matthew 6:25-33

Thanksgiving Sunday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Giving Thanks in Anxious Times”

“But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

“Don’t worry, be happy.”

I heard that song on the radio as I was driving to work one morning this past week – and I must admit that I was tempted to change the station. There’s nothing wrong with the song or its message, and I remember the video that Bobby McFerrin made with Robin Williams that was hilarious. It’s a cheerful, optimistic song that was meant to brighten one’s day; but there was something about the message of this song that struck me as naïve at best and inappropriate at worst. We are, after all, living in the most anxious of times, and there are so many legitimate reasons for us to worry about ourselves, our families, our communities, and even our world:

- The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that is now in its nineteenth month with no signs of coming to a conclusion.
- The continuing political and social polarization that is tearing communities and families apart.
- Economic uncertainty that creates concern for persons seeking employment, people looking to buy their first home, and older persons wondering if their retirement savings will be depleted too soon.
- Growing signs of the impact of climate change in increasing violent storms, rising sea levels, and the impact on agricultural and biological viability.

Amid all these very real concerns about the state of our world and the future of the human race, any call for us to *“don’t worry, be happy”* is not only simplistic – it’s almost downright offensive.

That song was ringing in my ears as I sat down to look at the lessons for this Thanksgiving Sunday – and there were the words of Jesus calling on his followers *“do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.”* (Matthew 6:25). This is a portion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ major teaching that takes up three chapters of the Gospel According

to Matthew. It is an authoritative teaching of our Lord, signaled by his position at the beginning of the teaching: *“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.”* (5:1). The Sermon on Mount includes such famous teachings as the Beatitudes, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Golden Rule; it also includes Jesus’ teaching on the Hebrew Scriptures, in which he declares *“do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill”* (5:17). Unlike last week’s lesson on marriage and divorce which was in response to a challenge by the Pharisees, this is a teaching that originated in Jesus’ teaching ministry *“as one having authority, and not as their scribes”* (7:29).

- “The Sermon presents the perfect, unadulterated will of God, the will of God in its nakedness, because it proclaims the will of God as it should be lived in the kingdom, when God’s will is done on earth as in heaven ... The Sermon is not primarily concerned with what is practical or possible in the here and now but with the unobstructed, perfect will of God.” – Dale C. Allison.

The section of the Sermon on the Mount that is today’s Gospel lesson must be understood in the context of the Kingdom of God that is at the heart of Jesus’ proclamation, the kingdom of which we are taught to pray in the Lord’s Prayer: *“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”* This is the reign of God that begins now and is brought to perfection in the life to come; it is the fulfillment of God’s Will for humanity, the intention of the sovereign God will that is often at odds with human wants and desires, as God proclaimed through the prophet Isaiah:

- “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” – Isaiah 55:8-11.

In the reign of God in which God will dwell amid God’s people and provide for all their needs *“out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all”* (Small Catechism), there is liberation from all that would cause fear, anxiety, and worry. This is the basis for Jesus’ teaching his followers not to worry about the basic necessities of life: *“about your life, what you*

will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.” On the surface, it appears that Jesus lacks understanding on the challenges of everyday people who struggle to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads; *“when interpreted on a superficial level, this statement could only have been written by a single guy living a carefree life on the beach in sunny Galilee.”* (Ulrich Luz). But Jesus is not teaching his followers to be unconcerned about providing for the basic needs of their loved ones, nor is he advocating that people not work for their daily bread and adopt the life of a carefree loafer who expects all the necessities of life to be dropped into one’s lap. “Worry” (*merimnan*), which is used five times in this passage, denotes excessive concern or anxiety that monopolizes the heart’s attention. Jesus uses it here to speak of self-concern relative to the future, the illusion that concern for the means of life can grant security to life itself. While we should look after our basic needs as well as those whose lives are entrusted into our care (in fact, we are called to make certain that all people share in the daily bread that our Lord provides for all God’s people: *“If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?”* – James 2:15-16), we need to focus on what is most important: trusting in the God who created the heavens and the earth to provide all that we need for daily living.

- “Jesus is not calling us all to abandon our lives and move to the desert to join a monastery or to empty our savings accounts and 401(k)s. Rather, he is addressing the basis for excessive worry and anxiety that can result from a life separated from God. The text calls us to a different set of values, different priorities.” – Richard Beaton.

Jesus’ words are not directed to rich people only, those inclined to the arrogance that comes with wealth; poor people can also idolize what they do not have and look upon riches as they key to happiness and security. Jesus’ teaching is directed to people involved with sowing, reaping, storing in barns, toiling, and spinning, but who are called to see that their life is not based on these things. It is a call to place our faith and trust in the Lord God who created the heavens and the earth and is still actively involved in this creation: *“God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties.”* (Small Catechism). Jesus points to two elements of this creation – the birds of the air and the lilies of the field – as signs of God’s continuing presence and care in providing for creatures who *“neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns,”* or flowers that *“neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of*

these” (6:26-29). Solomon was famous for his tremendous wealth and for investing much energy in acquiring extraordinary wealth and glory for himself:

- “Solomon’s horses were imported from Egypt and Kue; the king’s traders received them from Kue at the prevailing price. They imported from Egypt, and then exported, a chariot for six hundred shekels of silver, and a horse for one hundred and fifty; so through them these were exported to all the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Aram.” – 2 Chronicles 1:16-17.

Yet even the lilies of the field, clothed by God, are more spectacular. Although wildflowers and grass are transitory (“*The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it ...*” – Isaiah 40:7), God clothes them with beauty. If God care to clothe such disposable plant life with such beauty, how much more, Jesus asks, will God care for the disciples’ basic needs: “*But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith?*” (6:30). In pointing to God’s care for creatures of the air and flowers in the fields, Jesus invites his followers to consider God’s providence for all creation; this is the basis for Jesus’ call “*therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’*” (6:31). Jesus contrasts the faithful disciples with the “Gentiles” (*ethne*) who represent those who are constantly anxious about their lives because they do not know God as a loving Father who provides for them (“*Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*” – 6:8). True disciples do not worry excessively about these things because they entrust their lives entirely to their heavenly Father who knows all their needs: “*For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.*” (6:32). A mark of true disciples of Jesus Christ are those who “*strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*” (6:33). True discipleship involves being resolute in a wholehearted devotion to God; in the verses that come before this passage, Jesus teaches that “*no one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.*” (6:24). Those who have answered to call to discipleship (“*Follow me, and I will make you fish for people*” – 4:19) know that following the Will of God is the top priority in their lives: “*Jesus assures the disciples that if they put God’s kingdom first, God will care for their earthly necessities as well.*” (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri).

We hear the words of Jesus on another Thanksgiving Sunday in which we may find ourselves struggling to give thanks when thankfulness may be the furthest thing from our minds. It can be hard to feel thankful when we are still struggling with the

uncertainties and anxieties of this never-ending pandemic; when the news is filled with too many accounts of conflicts, atrocities, natural disasters, and economic distress; when there are divisions in our communities and our families; when hope for better days and a brighter future appear dimmer by the day. We hear the words of Scripture calling on us to *“rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”* (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18), and our communion liturgy proclaiming that *“it is indeed right, our duty and our joy, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks and praise to you, almighty and merciful God, through our Saviour Jesus Christ ...”* All these festive signs of the Thanksgiving season surround us – and yet we often struggle to find reasons to be thankful and may dismiss Jesus’ words to not be worried as the musings of a Pollyanna who is out of touch with the realities of our present age. But we must also remember that the one who teaches us to place our trust in the Lord is not a person who lived a charmed existence free from want or pain; our Lord was born a child of humanity, fully acquainted with all the pain and suffering that are endemic to the human experience. The letter to the Hebrews reminds us that *“we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin”* (Hebrews 4:15). Although Jesus is *“true God, begotten of the Father in eternity”* (Small Catechism), he chose to take the form of a servant to fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy of the Suffering Servant who *“was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account”* (Isaiah 53:3). Jesus knows how difficult and challenging life can be, and that we often worry about how we will provide for ourselves and for those we love. Jesus’ call is not to ignore the challenges of life, but to recognize that we do not face these challenges alone but in the presence of our loving God who abides with us, provides for us, protects us, and calls upon us to trust in the Lord’s providential love for all people. Because we are always in the presence of the Lord, because nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord, we are called to *“cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”* (1 Peter 5:7). As we rejoice in the good news that *“this is my Father’s world,”* we can be freed from the burden or worry and anxiety, for we are called to *“not forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.”* (ELW Hymn 824). We give thanks not because our lives are easy and carefree, but that even in the most challenging and uncertain of times we live in the sure and certain hope that *“the Lord is king, let the heavens sing; God reigns, let the earth be glad.”*

- “At the centre of the Christian faith is the conviction that in the universe there is a God of power who is able to do exceedingly abundant things in nature and

in history. This conviction is stressed over and over in the Old and the New Testaments. Theologically, this affirmation is expressed in the doctrine of the omnipotence of God. The God whom we worship is not a weak and incompetent God. He is able to beat back gigantic waves of opposition and to bring low prodigious mountains of evil. The ringing testament of the Christian faith is that God is able.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.

We give thanks not because life is without its challenges, but because we know that God is with us amidst even the greatest of difficulties and the most uncertain of times. We are called to cast all our worries and anxieties on the Lord who wants us *“to be free from anxieties”* (1 Corinthians 7:32), who liberates us from all burdens that seek to weigh us down and deny us the abundant life that is God’s Will for all God’s people. We still strive to provide for ourselves and the people we love, and we remained concerned to for the health and welfare of our families, our communities, and our congregations; but that concern need not descend into anxiety that can threaten our physical, emotional, and spiritual health. We give thanks *“at all times and in all places”* because no matter how difficult our circumstances may be, we live in confidence that *“the LORD of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold”* (Psalm 46:7).

- “Therefore we should leave all care to him. The work we do and the pains we take are not contrary to faith but are useful for the training of the flesh; but anxiety is contrary to God ... All that we achieve with our anxiety is that we stand in God’s way and hinder his work in us.” – Martin Luther, 1527.

“Don’t Worry, Be Happy” will probably never be a favourite song of mine, but it does contain an important message. We can be freed from worry and anxiety not because we lived charmed lives or see the world through rose-coloured glasses, but through the eyes of faith we see God’s presence in the world that is filled with deep sorrow and distress but yet is still the world that God loves and to which God sent his only Son. Knowing that God is with us, and that God will fulfill all that God desires for God’s creation is the basis for our hope, the faith that frees us from anxiety to *“serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days”* (Luke 1:73). We are able to give thanks in anxious times because we know that God is with us now as the day will come when our Lord will *“gather then thy people in, free from sorrow, free from sin.”*

“Don’t worry, be happy” – for God is with us always! Amen.