

Dear Friends,

This week we will celebrate Thanksgiving with a joyful service on Sunday morning. Our text for the day is Matthew 6:25-33, some of the most beloved words in all the Bible. These verses are placed in the middle of the sermon on the mount and follow Jesus' words on greed, miserliness and our idolatrous devotion to money.

The reading from the NRSV

“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his glory was clothed like one of these. 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? Therefore do not worry, saying “what will we eat? Or ‘what will we drink” or “what will we wear?” It is the gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Compared to the relative luxuries we enjoy, Christ's original audience lived a life deprived. Concerns about the next meal, about adequate clothing and a lack of shelter were immediate and real. There was every reason for anxiety.

Yet modern life is no antidote to worry. Indeed, if you look to your circumstances you will probably find plenty of cause for uncertainty and unease. Why worry? Why not worry?

We live in a culture that constantly hectors us to buy, spend, acquire, collect. And we begin to measure our own worth by the things we own. We define ourselves with the car we drive, the brands we wear, the lifestyle that we can or cannot afford. But deep inside we know that the collection of material items that constitutes our identity is unstable, fleeting and ultimately worthless. All that you own could disappear. Indeed lately much if it has been disappearing. And according to the logic of our time when this happens our very selves start to vanish too. Why worry? Why not worry?

I remember the Thanksgiving after September 11th hearing a spokesman for one of the airlines try to soothe our fears by saying, “Listen, people should not feel uneasy about air-travel. Don't worry. After all, over Thanksgiving weekend alone at least 525 Americans will die in automobile accidents.”

We have a lot to worry about. And if we cannot control our destiny at least we can fret about it. Worrying gives us a role to play. A job to do. It fills us and reflects the seriousness with which we take this life. Indeed, for most of us, trust and serenity require effort, but their opposite comes naturally. Name a situation, no matter how mundane and I'll find something in it to fret over.

And every time I do I find that my anxiety takes the joy right out of life. Indeed, our word “worry comes” from an old English verb “wreigh” which means “to strangle.” Worrying can choke the joy, the pleasure out of any situation. Out of life itself.

Why not worry? Here is a better reason. The words of Christ remind us that God is in our lives. Protecting, guiding and safeguarding. This is not some future guarantee. And the truth of Sunday's lesson transcends the limitations of history. Christ's words are not bound to the past. In the immediate, in the present, at this very moment God is active in your life.

The problem for many of us is that we experience God's absence more acutely than we do God's presence. Anxiety stings the faithful twice. Behind our particular worries there always lies the question: Why is God allowing this to happen? The thought is not always conscious, but if you believe in God's power every time you fret about your health, your relationship, your children's safety, your job-search, etcetera the question surfaces: Why is God allowing this to happen? Where is God in the face of pain?

This is a good and necessary inquiry, one with a rich scriptural precedent. But we are the very worst of ingrates, if we do not also pose its opposite: Why has God blessed us so abundantly? I sometimes worry that humanity is so busy white knuckling through the ride, the twists and turns, hills and valleys of existence that we fail to observe or absorb the beauty and the goodness flying by us all the while.

On Thanksgiving Sunday rather than continuing to wonder “why the pain?” I hope to invert the inquiry and ask, “why the pleasure?”

G.K Chesterton captures this sentiment perfectly in a little poem written to be read right before falling asleep:

*Here dies another day
During which I have had eyes, ears, hands
And the great world round me;
And with tomorrow begins another.
Why am I allowed two?*

We are allowed another day because we are beloved by the Author of our days, the Author of all that is. Why has God blessed us so abundantly? The answer is clear. We are cared for. We are protected. We are loved.

In an interesting spin on all of this the theologian Sam Wells says that the reason we have a hard time seeing or naming all of our blessings is because they are overwhelming. He writes

“The problem is that the human imagination is simply not large enough to take in all that God is and has to give. We are overwhelmed. God's inexhaustible creation, limitless grace, relentless mercy, enduring purpose, fathomless love; it is just too much to contemplate, assimilate, understand.”

I like this idea, but I think we should, of course, try our best to receive God's abundance, and try our

best to name our blessings and be grateful for them. Not only in order to give God the thanks that God deserves, but also in order to extend these gifts to others. For as religious people, as people called toward the source of all that is good in the world, we are called to make God's blessings known to those who do not see them.

Stanley Hauerwas makes this point when he says, *“Those who would follow Jesus are taught that we have time to care for one another through small acts of mercy because God's mercy is without limit.”* In other words, you can be merciful to others because you will always receive more mercy from God. You're not going to run out of love. God will always give you more. Hauerwas goes on to say, *“Abundance, not scarcity, is the mark of God's kingdom. But that abundance must be made manifest through the lives of a people who have discovered that they can trust God.”*

He is saying that it sometimes takes the love we give each other to prove the love of God.

What do you make of that idea?

How do you balance worry and gratitude in your life?

How is Thanksgiving a religious holiday?

I look forward to exploring these and other questions with you on Sunday morning. It should be a great worship service. We're singing some of the very best hymns.

God bless you,
Matt