

“Thanksgiving Freedom”

“Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’”

Stockbridge, Massachusetts is a beautiful village in the Berkshire Mountains that is the home to two iconic images that are associated with Thanksgiving Day:

- Arlo Guthrie’s “Alice’s Restaurant,” which tells the tale of how a littering violation on a Thanksgiving Day kept its narrator out of the military draft for the Vietnam War.
- Norman Rockwell’s “Freedom from Want,” with its image of a happy family gathered at the Thanksgiving table looking on with awe as their mother presents the turkey and all of their favourite foods for the family feast.

This painting is a part of a series called the “Four Freedoms,” which were published on the covers of the *Saturday Evening Post* in February & March 1943. Rockwell was inspired to paint these portraits by the State of the Union speech given by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on January 6, 1941, in which he outlined four freedoms that are essential for people living in a democracy:

- Freedom of speech
- Freedom of worship
- Freedom from want
- Freedom from fear

While Roosevelt’s speech was given at a very different time and place, these are still freedoms that we cherish as we celebrate Thanksgiving this weekend. We give thanks that we live in a country where freedom of speech and freedom of worship are available to us (unlike in many nations where gathering for worship can be a dangerous act). We give thanks for the abundance of the harvest in which we recognize how God is at work among us to “give us this day our daily bread,” which includes *“all the necessities and nourishment for our bodies”* (*Small Catechism*) which we receive with thanksgiving, even as we strive to share this abundance with those who are still in want. And we give thanks for the good news that in Christ Jesus we receive freedom from fear, for *“there is not fear in love”* that is ours in our Lord and Saviour, who in today’s Gospel lesson calls upon his followers to cast aside fear and anxiety as they *“strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”* (Matthew 6:33).

This portion of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount begins with a command: *“do not worry about your life.”* The word that is translated “worry” (*merimnan*) is self-concern relative to the future (other Bible versions translate the phrase as “do not be anxious”). Such “worry” is foolish because it fosters the illusion that concern for the means of life can grant security for life itself. The future is not in our hands; we cannot add *“a single hour to your span of life”* by worrying. Jesus’ teaching offers his followers freedom from such anxiety in focusing on seeking *“the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”* (6:33). Freedom from worry and anxiety may be found when we *“seek first the kingdom, and God will see to other things, not by removing uncertainty but taking the worry out of it.”* (Geoffrey Bromiley).

The challenge to trust in God’s providence does not exclude working and having property. Jesus’ words are directed to people involved with sowing, reaping, storing in barns, toiling, and spinning. While we need to work to provide food and clothing for ourselves and those for whom we are responsible – indeed, God is the one who gives dignity to our work (*“Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”* – 1 Corinthians 15:58) – we are called to

recognize that our lives are not based on these things, for *“life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.”* (6:25). For those who answer Jesus’ call to discipleship, there is only one priority: *“the kingdom of God and his righteousness (dikaiosyne)”*, which is related both to the idea of God’s coming kingdom and God’s providential care in the present. *“[The disciples] are told not to be anxious, that the one who calls them to this radical style of life is also the creator who lovingly provides for the whole creation and who will finally bring the whole creation into his kingdom.”* (M. Eugene Boring).

Jesus’ teaching offers us a glimpse of a life that all of us would like to enjoy: a life free from fear, worry and anxiety; a life in which we no longer have to be concerned with where we will get our next meal or how we will provide for ourselves and others. It is a life in which the same God who *“so clothes the grass of the field”* will clothe even those who are of *“little faith”*, and promises that all will be provided for those who seek God’s kingdom and live according to God’s righteousness.

- “A believing heart well perceives how our plowing and sowing would be lost unless God’s goodness were here at work. Even though we must do our work diligently and seek our food from the soil, we must in no way trust in our work as though our hands made the harvest. More is needed than human hands. God’s blessing and his mighty keeping are essential for growth.” – Martin Luther, *Day by Day We Magnify You*.

The life that Jesus presents is truly one all of us would like to experience – but is it a realistic portrait of life as it truly is? One critique of Norman Rockwell’s paintings is that they depict a world that is idealistic, the way we wish things would be rather than the way things really exist. All of us desire to gather with those we love at a table overflowing with an abundance of food; but for too many people, they have neither such abundance in their lives nor the love of family and friends with whom to share such a feast. All of us would wish a world in which fear, worry, and anxiety did not exist; but we know that not only are we often weighed down with tremendous burdens of fears, but that our worries and anxieties about others are unavoidable – we can’t help but worry about the safety and well-being of the people we love.

- “The world weighs on my shoulders, but what am I to do? You sometimes drive me crazy, but I worry about you. I know it makes no difference to what you’re going to; but I see the tip of the iceberg and I worry about you.” – Rush, *Distant Early Warning*.

Some of our worries grow out of our love and concern for our families and the people we love. We worry about our children as we send them off to school, concerned for their safety and well-being. We worry about the health of our spouses when the doctor calls requesting we return for further medical tests. We worry about our retirement savings and the uncertainty of the markets, concerned over whether we will have adequate funds for when we are no longer able to work. We worry about the state of our community, nation, and world, and even as we vote we worry that those who are elected to office will govern justly and wisely. Such worries are a natural part of what it means to love another person, those who we have promised to remain faithful in sickness and in health, for better or worse, in all the circumstances and challenges of life.

I don’t believe that Jesus is counseling against such worry, that he is chastising us for being concerned about the well-being of our loved ones and carefully planning for their future security. I also do not hear Jesus teaching us that we should no longer work to support those who are relying on us for the basic necessities of life (unlike the Messalians, against whom Augustine wrote *On the Work of Monks*, who used Jesus’ teaching to justify abandoning manual labour); each of us is called to be faithful stewards of the gifts and talents God has bestowed on us by engaging in our vocations for the good of others. What Jesus is counseling against is allowing our natural concerns to grow into anxieties that can either cripple us or give us the false illusion that somehow we might be able to change the future through our excessive worrying, because such worrying accomplishes nothing.

- “Whether or not we are to look beneath the question and think about God, the one who can lengthen life or stature, the meaning of the rhetorical question [‘Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your

span of life?'] is straightforward: anxiety accomplishes nothing, or at least nothing desirable. One could cite a dozen proverbs to this effect, and we all know this truth from experience, but our inability to live according to what we know requires that we be reminded again and again." – Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*

We are called to seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness and trust that *"all these things will be given to you as well"* because as we give thanks for the wonders of creation that are present among us in this, "our Father's world," we are also called to not forget that *"though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet."* Jesus calls us to trust that the Lord God who created the heavens and the earth is still actively involved in God's creation, and that *"the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."* (Philippians 1:6). In the *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther reminds us that this knowledge of God's eternal presence among us is the basis for our confidence and the reason why we can be freed from the bondage of worrying, fear, and anxiety, knowing that in all things God is truly with us:

- "I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties. In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property – along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And all this is done out of pure, fatherly goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true."

Perhaps the key to understanding Jesus' teaching is actually found in the verse that precedes today's Gospel lesson, in which 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). "Hate and love" do not refer to emotions, but represent a biblical idiom for "choose/not choose." Undivided service can be given to only one master; if there is more than one, every choice means favoring of one and rejection of the other. Like the Beatitudes (*"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."* – 5:8), this is a call for unity of the person who must make a choice: serving either God or *mammon*, an Aramaic word for "property," including but not limited to money. Jesus places wealth on a par with God as an object of service, an idolatrous rival to the one true God. *"The choice is not whether we shall serve, but what or whom we shall serve."* (Boring). Jesus is *not* implying that wealth is in and of itself bad or evil; in fact, wealth can be used to bring tremendous good. The problem with wealth is that it makes a poor master – or "lord" (*kurios*), the word that Jesus actually uses here. A "lord" is the one who demands and deserves your loyalty, allegiance, and worship; when our wealth becomes our "ultimate concern," that which is at the center of our lives, then it is wealth that has replaced our Lord Jesus Christ as our true god.

Many people, of course, have made this choice, placing their ultimate confidence in their wealth to bring them security and happiness, to provide for all of their needs. Wealthy people are often held up as role models and persons who are to be respected and emulated. Those with wealth get the best seats in theatres and restaurants, have hospital wings and university buildings named after them, and have influence on government officials far greater than the average citizen. By some appearances, wealth may seem to be a god that is truly worthy of allegiance. But the problem with wealth is the larger worldview that crowns it as lord in the first place: *scarcity*. No matter how much wealth we may accumulate, it never seems to be enough; all we notice is that we need to acquire more, and are therefore always anxious about whether the wealth we have obtained will address the needs that cause us to worry.

- "Again, the issue isn't money per se; the problem comes when we make money our god – that thing, as Luther once observed, which we trust for our every good. Once we believe that money can satisfy our deepest needs, then we suddenly discover that we never have enough. Money, after all, is finite. And so once we decide money grants security, then we are ushered immediately into a world of counting,

tracking, and stock piling. No wonder we worry – in a world of scarcity, there is simply never enough.” – David Lose, *Working Preacher*.

The alternative to this anxiety over scarcity that is a consequence of placing our trust in wealth is entering into a relationship with God, the God who is infinite and whose love for us and all creation is infinite as well. While allegiance to wealth ushers us into a world defined by scarcity, placing our trust and faith in God open us to a new reality: that of *abundance*, of limitless possibilities that are ours in God whose love is steadfast, whose presence is everlasting, and whose promises are of a life in which we are freed from the worries and anxieties of who will provide for us or what kind of future we will enjoy because now our future is *God’s* future, built on God’s promises which are always steadfast and sure, on the will of God which will be done “*on earth as it is in heaven*.”

- “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 of 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 55:10-11.
- “On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.” – Isaiah 25:6-8.
- “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” – Romans 8:38-39.

Our trusting in the Lord brings us freedom from worrying and anxiety because the one who clothes the grass of the field and gives glory to the lilies will also provide for us in far greater abundance than we could imagine on our own. When our hope is “*built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness*,” when we place our trust in Christ who died and rose again so that “*if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his*.” (Romans 6:5). Karl Barth points out that Christ’s death and resurrection removes the ground for all anxiety for those who are born anew to a living hope through our baptism into Christ:

- “We may be anxious, but we cannot provide for our anxiety the object which it must have if it is to have any final seriousness. We cannot give it an absolute character. We can only deceive ourselves and others if we think that there is good reason for it, and that we achieve anything by it. Our care is empty and futile. By it we can only realize and reveal our sin and shame.” – *Church Dogmatics*.

Norman Rockwell’s paintings may present an idealized, nostalgic portrayal of life as we wish it was or desire it to be; but “Freedom from Want” is not wishful thinking but the will of God who desires all to share in the abundance of God’s creation. In Christ, we have been freed from all that would deny us the blessings that God intends for all people, including freedom from worry, fear, and anxiety that can cripple us, cause us to despair about our lives and our future, and blind us to the goodness of this that is our Father’s world. When we seek the kingdom of God and place our trust in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, we can give thanks for the blessings of a life that is freed to worship God without fear, holy and blessed in the sight of God all the days of our life. Amen.