

October 7, 2018
Matthew 6:25-33

Thanksgiving Sunday
Vicar Jonah Bruce

“Do not Worry – Be Thankful”

Have you ever found it difficult to be thankful?

Have you ever gotten so caught up worrying about the details or demands of life that you forgot to savor or enjoy the moment?

It happens to me far too often.

I am a perfectionist who cares about the minute details that many people in my life tend to overlook. So, when holidays or family gatherings arise, I go into what I call “work mode.” I put my nose to the grindstone and I do my absolute best to ensure that every tiny detail is perfectly attended to.

My partner, Nathalie, can attest to the fact that I am a perfectionist to a fault!

I have no idea why I am like this. No one in my immediate family has ever been concerned with details. Perhaps I developed this trait as a means of picking up the etiquette or slack that I knew my family was lacking. Nevertheless, it is something that I struggle with and at times it can be a blessing but most of the time it feels more like a curse.

I remember my final thanksgiving meal at home with my family. I knew that it was probably going to be the last opportunity that I would have to be together with the people that I had grown up with. I knew that life was about to take many of us in different directions and so, I wanted that final thanksgiving meal to be PERFECT. My mother sorrowfully reminded me that she had tried for many years to have a “nice thanksgiving supper” but circumstances outside of her control always seemed to have a negative impact on the occasion – so she was tired of trying and was more than willing to let me take charge.

I bought new silverware, shined our Corelle dishes and planned out a perfect meal. I even took the time to arrange a seating plan that would ensure minimal discussion between family members who struggled to get along. It was going to be a year that nobody could forget.

The 18 pound, home grown chicken was in the oven, one Crock-pot was filled with stuffing, and another housed what must have been 20 pounds of potatoes. On the stove top there was homemade cranberry sauce, gravy, and of course, butternut squash. In the fridge, I had homemade cheesecake and four homemade pumpkin pies. I had everyone’s favorite items. It was 2 pm, everything was going according to schedule, and dinner was going to be on time for 4 pm.

By 2:15, guests were starting to arrive, but I could not leave the kitchen to greet them, because if I did, something MIGHT go wrong. I was so worried that it wouldn’t be the most perfect and unforgettable meal, that I missed the opportunity to spend time with them before supper.

But, how could I leave? The squash might not taste perfectly if wasn’t stirred every 5 minutes or the gravy might boil over and burn if it wasn’t closely monitored. And I was worried that the chicken might get dry if I wasn’t there to continually baste it. I was so worried that things wouldn’t be perfect.

Of course, as it often does, the unexpected happened. A huge storm blew up out of no-where and the power went out.

My blood pressure went through the roof and despite my laborious efforts, there was no way that I could finish cooking the meal. In fact, the power surge was so bad that it fried both of the Crock-pots and left the house filled with the stench of burnt stuffing and potatoes.

People kept telling me not to worry about it, that it would be fine...they clearly did not understand how important this meal actually was! I had done everything that I could do and so I threw my hands into the air and said a prayer that quickly transitioned from something along the lines of: "this is so unfair" to: "God, I need You!"

The electricity came back on around 4:30 and my mother finished cooking the meal because at that time, a meal that wasn't perfect was not worth serving in my mind.

We sat around the table and ate the remnants of what was once a perfect meal: smoke flavored potatoes and stuffing, dry chicken, thick gravy, soggy squash, and of course, warm and deformed cheesecake. At least the pumpkin pie held together!

In my worried mind, the meal was a disaster. I spent the entire time apologizing to people, saying how frustrated I was that things were not perfect, and I completely wasted the final time that we would be together as a group. I was so worried about the perfect meal that I forgot to be thankful for food. I was so worried about perfection and what other people thought that I forgot to be thankful for the time that we had together.

To this day, my family talks about this meal and how much they enjoyed their time and conversations with one another. All that I can really remember is how worried I was and how things did not turn out perfectly. My worry and my anxiety got the best of me and I missed out because of it. My worry blinded me from enjoying time with my family – just like worry can so easily blind people from enjoying the things and promises of God.

Perhaps others can relate when I say that worrying seems to come so naturally to me? It is somewhat comical that today I am not only faced with a biblical passage about worrying, but that I am called to preach on it!

I find it so hard not to worry and when someone tells me not to worry, it is so frustrating. I am often guilty of thinking that people who tell me not to worry are far too optimistic – because if they understood how dire my circumstances were, they too would be worried!

But even Jesus is saying: do not worry.

I wonder if the people of Jesus' time were equally frustrated with these words? It's clear that he often ministered to poor and oppressed people – people who probably had a good reason to worry about food and clothing, just as I had good reason to worry about hosting the perfect thanksgiving meal. I

wonder if those early believers would have interpreted Christ's words as a comforting promise or as impractical optimism in light of the harsh reality of their circumstances? Maybe some of them were caught in a continuum of knowing that God would provide but still felt worried and anxious by questions of when and where and how?

The world is filled with people who are anxiously waiting on things outside of their control – waiting on a child who has missed their curfew, waiting on a promise, a prayer, waiting on test results... waiting for circumstances to end, waiting for a new journey to begin... Or in my case, waiting for the electricity to turn back on! The process of waiting and not knowing so easily produces feelings of worry and anxiety.

So, why does Jesus, in today's gospel narrative, offer this instruction not to worry?

Is he saying that human effort and desire are worthless? Is he instructing the people of God to live carefree, recklessly, or without concern? Is he telling me that I should not have wanted to serve the perfect thanksgiving meal?

I pondered many different ways of interpreting today's text and after much struggle and worry about the composition of a sermon, I have come to read and interpret the words of Christ as what Luther refers to as Gospel – as a message of hope, as a reminder of God's love in and through Christ, as a promise that God knows what is needed and that God is with us, always.

This message of hope came through more clearly for me when I began to read the surrounding context of today's narrative. Today's reading comes at the end of Matthew chapter 6, but when read as a part of Christ's longer dialogue, often referred to as the sermon on the mount, one might note a reoccurring theme of sight or repeated references to the action of seeing. Matthew begins by talking about the way in which other people might see or interpret our actions and then moves into a discussion of God who sees everything, even the things that are done in secret. And then the chapter somewhat naturally progresses into today's text, where the focus appears to be on the perspective through which one might see the world.

The text is drawing a comparison between perspective and worrying. Worrying seems to be a bi-product of a perspective that is focused on the needs and the desires of this world. As I focused my attention on the difficulty of preparing a perfect meal, I could not help but worry. When the power went out and circumstances were outside of my control, I was forced into a place of waiting, of not knowing, of anxiety, of fear, of worrying. And that worry did nothing to aid or help the situation. In fact, worry blinded me from seeing that God was allowing an imperfect meal to be fed to a group of people who now talk about their fond memories of that imperfect day.

Friends, Jesus tells us that there is nothing to be gained from worrying. There is no need to worry. Instead, there is great reason to be thankful, because God, who is rich in love and mercy, promises to protect and to care for those who are willing to trust in the promises of God. There is a reason to be thankful, there is a reason to rejoice, there is a reason not to worry, and there is a reason to share the message of God's love with and for all people. Because the God who cares for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, also understands the significance of human need and has the love and the authority to care and to provide for each and every one of us.

Jesus isn't saying that the things of this life are not important, nor is he encouraging people to live recklessly or without care. He isn't diminishing the necessity of food or clothing, he isn't saying that my final thanksgiving meal at home was a worthless endeavor – instead he is encouraging a shift from a focus on the things and the problems of this world and is urging for a focus on the love and the compassion of God... because when the focus is on the will, and the love, and the authority of God, there is hope, there is peace, there is provision, there is rest.

God promises to provide. I know that it can be so hard to trust and to wait amidst uncertainty, but the gospel message is that there is no need to worry because God loves and promises to be with us, always. It doesn't mean that the journey will be easy, nor that God will provide for every want and desire. Instead, Christ is promising that the peace and the love of God will veil and protect all who are willing to trust and to journey with and according to the will of God.

I often think of the words of a Hymn that I grew up singing: "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face and the things of this earth will grow strangely dim in the light of God's glory and grace." The words of this hymn seem so similar to what Jesus is suggesting in today's text. I often sing them to remind myself that I need to focus on who and what God is, because when focusing on the promises of God, the worries and anxieties of this life start to seem a little bit less important than what anxiety and worry often lead me to believe.

I had every reason to be thankful throughout that final thanksgiving meal at home, but I couldn't see that because I was blinded by worry and anxiety. I now realize that on that day, and on this thanksgiving day, there are so many things to be thankful for: family, friends, good food and good company, but I am especially thankful for the sense of hope and of peace that comes from trusting in God who promises to provide – whose love is never failing, who understands what it means to be human, who promises to be there, always. I am thankful for a God who promises to never leave or forsake, for a God whose loving presence serves as a veil of comfort and protection.

So friends, on this thanksgiving morning, I invite you to join me in following the advice of Christ: do not worry, do not be anxious. Instead, be thankful for the love and promises of God that hold and sustain us each and every day.

Amen.