

“Worry-Free Faith”

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

I do not usually follow my daily horoscope in the newspaper, but one day I did look at it was my birthday. In addition to offering the astrological advice for each zodiac sign, the column has a special section for those celebrating a birthday, offering insights into one’s personality as well as predictions for the coming year. I read it most for fun, since I do not plan my life based on what the stars may tell me about my life and future. The column concludes with a section that tells those celebrating birthdays of celebrities with whom they share this special day. I know of three famous people who were also born on my birthday: Lawrence Welk, the late bandleader who was a favourite of my father; Sam Donaldson, the news journalist known for his no-holds-barred style of interviewing; and Bobby McFarren, the talented singer whose most famous song is “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” It is a very catchy tune that can become an “earworm,” a song that gets into your head that you find yourself humming for the rest of the day. It is a very cheerful, positive song – but it is also a song that raises questions in my mind. It must be nice, I often think, to be able to follow such advice, to be free from worry so that one can live a happy life without being concerned about paying the mortgage, putting food on the table, making certain that our family is doing well, being concerned for the state of our community, our nation, and our world, and living in fear for the future of humanity. Whenever I hear the song, my first reaction is usually, “Easy for you to say, Bobby, but I live in the real world, and of course I worry!”

While it is months before my March birthday, I found myself humming this song when I turned to today’s Gospel lesson and heard words from Jesus that sound very similar to those of Bobby McFarren: *“Therefore I tell you, 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). At first, I had the same reaction as I do each time I hear that song; but then I remembered that these are not merely the lyrics of a popular song but the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who is *“the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth”* (John 1:14), and those of our Saviour who alone *“has the words of eternal life.”* (John 6:68). I cannot dismiss the words of our Lord merely because they do not meet with my understanding of the role of

worry in my life, and how I find it impossible and unreasonable to live a worry-free life amid the challenges of living in these anxious times. The question for people of faith is not whether we find these words reasonable, but what is our Lord teaching us that we may miss if we do not take them seriously and seek to discern what our Lord is saying to us through God's Holy Word.

Today's Gospel lesson is a part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' major teaching in Matthew's Gospel that offers guidance to those who would accept Jesus' invitation to discipleship. The Sermon includes the Beatitudes, Jesus' interpretation of the Torah, his identifying his followers as "salt of the earth" and "light of the world," the Lord's Prayer, lessons on how we are to pray, and his invitation to "*ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.*" (Matthew 7:7). In the words of John Calvin, the Sermon on the Mount gathers "*into one single passage the chief headings of Christ's teaching, that had regard to the rule of godly and holy living.*"

Today's Gospel lesson continues Jesus' teaching on the who one is to place one's trust. He cautions his followers against placing their confidence in earthly treasures, that which does not last, and which can be stolen or consumed, and focusing one's trust instead on God's eternal love and blessings:

- "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." – 6:19-21.

For Jesus, the issue is not one of finance but of trust, that in which we place our confidence and look to for security and blessings. He also warns his disciples that they cannot 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). It is in this context of in whom we place our trust that Jesus goes on to encourage his listeners to "*not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear*" (6:25). Jesus uses the word "worry" (*merimneso*) four times in this section; the word means "to care for," and in Jesus' usage means to be overly concerned, to care too much, or to be anxious. Worry in this understanding denotes excessive concern and anxiety that monopolizes the heart's attention. While the necessities of life such as eating, drinking, and clothing are important ("*The necessities of life are water, bread, and clothing, and also a house to assure privacy*" – Sirach 29:21), they are not the ultimate goal in life. Jesus' call to not worry about these things does not mean that these necessities

are unimportant; what he is reminding his listeners is that as people of faith they are to trust in the God to whom they pray “*give us this day our daily bread*,” trusting in God to provide all of these necessities for daily living:

- “What then does ‘daily bread’ mean? Everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies, such as food, clothing, shoes, house, farm, fields, livestock, money, property, an upright spouse, upright children, upright members of the household, upright and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, decency, honour, good friends, faithful neighbours, and the life.” – Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*.

The challenge to trust in God’s providence does not exclude working and having property; Jesus’ words are directed to people whose lives include sowing, reaping, storing in barns, toiling, and spinning. What Jesus is calling them to see is that their lives are not based on these things: “*Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?*” (6:25b). Jesus points to example from nature to show how God provides for God’s creation and will certainly care for human beings who were placed into this good creation at the beginning of time. He invites his listeners to “*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?*” (6:26). After challenging them to consider if “*any of you by worrying [can] add a single hour to your span of life*” (6:27) – the implied answer if “no” – Jesus turns their attention to the lilies of the field, flowers that neither toil nor spin, “*yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these*” (6:29). Jesus’ reference to King Solomon is a reference to his role in Jewish society as the epitome of great wealth and wisdom:

- “Thus, King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. The whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind. Every one of them brought a present, objects of silver and gold, garments, weaponry, spices, horses, and mules, so much year by year.” – 1 Kings 10:23-25.

Although the lilies of the field and the grass of the field is transitory, that it “*is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven*” (6:30), God still clothes them with beauty; if God so cares for them, “*will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith?*” Jesus challenges his listeners to consider that “*if God cares to clothe such disposable plant life with beauty, how much more so will he care for the disciples’ basic needs?*” (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri).

Because followers of Jesus place their trust in the God who so cares for the birds of the air and lilies of the field and therefore also human beings that God placed into this good creation, persons of faith are also taught to “*therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will be drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’*” (6:31). Jesus contrasts the faithful disciples who place their trust in God with the “Gentiles,” those outside of the faith who are constantly anxious about their lives: “*For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things ...*” (6:32a). The Gentiles do not know God as a loving Father who provides for them; “*Thus they anxiously run after treasures on earth and never find the peace and happiness they seek*” (Mitch and Sri). The true disciples, however, do not worry excessively about these things because they entrust their lives entirely to their heavenly Father who “*knows that you need all these things*” (6:32b). Persons of faith heed Jesus’ call to “*strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*” (6:33). For those who seek after God’s rule in the world, concern for wealth and possessions conflicts with God’s provisions for the necessities of life. Matthew relates “righteousness” (*dikaiosyne*) both to the idea of the coming eschatological kingdom and to the idea of trust in the Father’s providential care. Disciples are to seek God’s kingdom above all else. Jesus’ disciples are taught not to be anxious, to be consumed by worrying over the source of life’s necessities, because the one who calls them to follow him is also the Creator who lovingly provides for the whole creation “*out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!*” (*Small Catechism*), and who will finally bring the whole creation into his kingdom. Jesus assures his disciples that if they put God’s kingdom first, God will care for their earthly necessities, that “*all these things will be given to you as well.*”

- “The Preacher on the Mount is not an unrealistic exponent of romanticism, but one who knows that the sparrow will fall to the ground and that trusting in God’s providential care is not a strategy by which disciples can have it easy.” – M. Eugene Boring.

As we gather on this Thanksgiving Sunday to give thanks to God for all of the goodness of creation and the abundant harvest that are a sign to us that “*all good gifts around us are sent from heaven above; so thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love*” (ELW Hymn 681), we hear Jesus’ words as a call for us to experience this same worry-free faith that Jesus desires for all of his followers. As we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Baptism on this day of thanksgiving, we are reminded that it is through baptism that we are born anew to the living hope that is ours when we are reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ. In the waters of Holy Baptism, God claims us as God’s beloved children, and

promises us that we are “*sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.*” (ELW Holy Baptism). It is a reminder to us that we are always in God’s loving presence, and that God will provide for us each day as God also assures us that the day will come when our Lord and Saviour will gather us into our eternal home, where as surely as “*goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*” (Psalm 23). We give thanks on this day of thanksgiving for the gift of Holy Baptism, praising God “*for the gift of water that sustains life, and above all we praise you for the gift of new life in Jesus Christ.*” (ELW Thanksgiving for Baptism). As baptized children of God, we are called into a worry-free faith that liberates us from the bondage of anxiety so that we might focus on God’s call to us to serve as the embodiment of his love in the world as people who are holy and righteous in his sight all the days of our lives.

- “Jesus expects his followers to put forward energy into things that give more meaning to life. We must strive to discern how God is working in the world and how to participate in acts of justice on God’s behalf. Beyond that, everything else will take care of itself. Or, to summarize Jesus, God will deal with the rest.” – Emerson Powery.

Being freed from the bondage of worry and anxiety does not mean that we shirk our responsibility toward that which has been entrusted to us. The call to live as a disciple of Christ is a call to stewardship, to care for God’s creation and those in our lives to whom we bear responsibility. We are called to care for those we love – our parents, children, spouses, extended family, and close friends – making certain that they have all they need for daily living and can share in the abundant life that God desires for all people. We are called to care for those among whom we live in our community, our nation, and our world, making certain that we are good stewards of the creation in which we live and which we will pass on to future generations. We are called to care for the Church of Jesus Christ that has been entrusted to us, being faithful in continuing the mission of this community of faith that was passed on to us by our ancestors and in turn passing it on to future generations who will shine the light of Christ in the world in which they will live. We are called to be responsible stewards of all that has been entrusted to us, not being filled with worry or anxiety because we know that God will provide us with all we need so that we might be faithful in our service and find joy in walking as a child of the light.

- “Stewardship must be understood first as descriptive of the being – the very life – of God’s people. Deeds of stewardship arise out of the being of the steward … Real and effective deeds of stewardship will occur only when persons hear the gospel and are moved by that Spirit that changes their being, lifting them from the sloth of

irresponsibility or judging their pride of mastery and giving them new being – the being of stewards.” – Douglas John Hall.

When my next birthday comes along, I will probably check out the horoscope about what it purports for the coming year; but I will not be putting much faith in its predictions. I will undoubtedly see a reference to Bobby McFarren sharing my birthday; but I doubt that I will adopt the words of his hit song as my credo for life. I will give thanks for the years that God has given me; and when my baptismal anniversary of April 28 come along, I will give thanks to God for the new life that is ours through water and the Word and the promise that God abides with us all the days of our lives even as we look to the day when our Lord will gather us into our eternal home. I will give thanks for our worry-free faith that liberates us from the bondage of anxiety so that we might trust in God and serve all people, following the example of Jesus who came not to be served but to serve so that all might know God’s liberating love and the grace that is ours through the abundant blessings God showers upon us. As we give thanks on this day, may we live as people of faith rooted in our thanksgiving for the steadfast love of God that abides with us, provides for us, and assures us that nothing will separate us from the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord, who liberates us so that we might walk in freedom to serve others as children of our God of gracious, steadfast love.

Let us “*thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love!*”

Amen.