

FIRST LESSON: Joel 2:21-27
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 6:25-33
November 24, 2024

“Living in Thanksgiving”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Anyone over a certain age will be able to relate to this woman. She went to a department store to buy a dress for a special occasion. But after trying on dress after dress she finally complained to the salesclerk who came in to collect the rejects, “Nothing looks good on me anymore.”

“Nonsense, ma’am,” said the salesclerk trying to reassure her. “That dress says it all.”

“That’s the problem,” the woman replied. “I need a dress that keeps its mouth shut.”

What’s easier to do—complain or give thanks? Pay attention to the negative or the positive? An ancient Greek philosopher named Epictetus taught that we become what we focus on. If we think about what we lack and how terrible life is, how our body isn’t what it used to be or how our family disappoints us, discontent and suffering will be our lot. But if we are grateful, even in the midst of hardship, we thrive. Gratitude, or being thankful, changes our lives. When we are grateful to God we connect to God. When we are grateful for the kindness of others our relationships are enriched. It has been scientifically proven that gratitude even improves our health. But gratitude is not about pretending away bad things. To live a thankful or grateful life means finding the good even in the midst of struggle. It is a matter of what we concentrate our attention on.

Jesus knew the struggles of the people he spoke to. Life was hard. People were always just one step away from destitution. But despite this he said, “So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

That there is great evil in our world is a fact, and there was a context to Jesus’ words. Jesus was speaking to people dealing with ordinary life. And while gratitude will always help even in dire situations, more than 44,000 people have died in Gaza, most of them women and children. While gratitude will help, the impact of the attack that began this unfolding disaster remains. Eleven million people in Sudan have been displaced by civil war and brutal attacks on women and girls are a daily fact of life. Jesus is not saying to people

suffering some of the worst crisis on our planet that if they would only learn to count their blessings everything would be alright. Evil things do happen in this world. They happened in Jesus' day and they happen now. Jesus was well aware of this fact, but he still told us not to be consumed by worry because worry isn't particularly helpful. It serves no constructive function. Action may help. Crippling anxiety won't. And when we turn to God, God promises to be with us.

Most people in this congregation have not had the experience of living hand to mouth, but some have. Despite my Lower Merion upbringing, I was blessed in my twenties to experience significant poverty. "Blessed"?! you say? Yes, blessed, because it is the only way I could have ever really grasped God's provision and how to live in thankfulness. In 1983, I lived in a Glasgow tenement flat with a stressed marriage, a toddler and a newborn. Our income was well below the poverty line. You know all the different house cleaning products there are? Guess what? Cheap dishwashing liquid works for just about everything. As I walked down the street pushing a pram that was literally collapsing with each step I took I told God I needed a new one. When I arrived back at the flat my neighbor from upstairs gave me her old one. It was much better quality than the one I had! Invariably as I was contemplating nothing to cook for dinner someone would knock on the door and hand me food. Not just once, but many times. I never went shopping for clothes for myself or my children either. The money was just not there. We were clothed via gifts from my parents at Christmas and birthdays and big bags of second-hand clothing that were occasionally handed in. I didn't go shopping. Ever. I couldn't. But I was always clothed. I didn't buy a single piece of furniture until I moved back here. It was always "someone's auntie passed away do you need anything?" We furnished an entire house in Dundee that way. And you should have seen the curtains! Oh my were they ever hideous! The heavy brocade of the 30s and 40s was a little easier on the eyes than the bizarre fashions of the 50s and 60s, but they all kept the drafts out! God may not be much of an interior decorator, but it all worked.

I'm always astounded when I see people rip out and replace perfectly functional things. My only hope when they do so is that they find someone who wants to use what they have gotten rid of. I have learned to be content. I don't have to have the newest or latest because I have God in my life and people who I love. Material goods are empty by themselves. We tend to redecorate at our house when there's a flood or a fire.

Most of our worries in this congregation are "first world" worries. Compared to the rest of the world we are rich. But in naming the basic categories of food and clothing, by inference Jesus includes all of the material physical things we worry about. We may not worry about having clothes, but we may worry about having the "right" clothes so we fit in at work. We may not be concerned that our kids will be naked, but we might worry about them being bullied at school because we cannot afford to buy them the latest brands. (And yes, this does happen.) We may have food, but can we afford healthy food? And always there is, will I keep my job? Will I find the right job? Will I ever be able to retire?

The answer to the debilitating anxiety we live with is gratitude. Excessive worry destroys our health and steals our peace. Jesus says if we cannot trust God with the everyday things, how will we trust God with the truly big things? Our lives can be spent obsessed with getting, having and keeping, or be lived seeking God's way in the world. If we truly know that God will take care of us, we are free to care about the things that matter. We can look at the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. We can take note of the fact that we do have clothes, and that somehow God does help us to pay the bills every month. We can open our eyes to the blessings all around us. And we can work for a better world while we thank God for what we have.

Jesus reminds us that our heavenly Father knows that we have physical needs but God wants us to seek God's kingdom and God's righteousness first. He doesn't say seek ONLY. He says seek FIRST. We live in a physical world. It is common sense that we should go to work and support our families. But God wants us to try to live according to God's principles. Jesus wants us to focus our attention on what really matters—love, justice, mercy and peace, rather than being consumed chasing material things and living in perpetual anxiety. And he assures us that if we have our priorities in order, God will meet our practical needs. I can't vouch for the curtains matching, but it will all somehow work.

Paul reminds us in the letter to the Philippians, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." This is the antidote to crippling worry. And at this time of year as we gather with friends and family we give thanks. But thanksgiving should be every day. A thankful heart is a free heart, regardless of what life brings our way. Amen

Joel 2:21-27

21 Do not be afraid, land of Judah;
be glad and rejoice.

Surely the Lord has done great things!

22 Do not be afraid, you wild animals,
for the pastures in the wilderness are becoming green.

The trees are bearing their fruit;
the fig tree and the vine yield their riches.

23 Be glad, people of Zion,
rejoice in the Lord your God,
for he has given you the autumn rains
because he is faithful.

He sends you abundant showers,
both autumn and spring rains, as before.

24 The threshing floors will be filled with grain;
the vats will overflow with new wine and oil.

25 “I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten—
the great locust and the young locust,
the other locusts and the locust swarm^[a]—

my great army that I sent among you.

26 You will have plenty to eat, until you are full,
and you will praise the name of the Lord your God,
who has worked wonders for you;
never again will my people be shamed.

27 Then you will know that I am in Israel,
that I am the Lord your God,
and that there is no other;
never again will my people be shamed.

Matthew 6:25-33

25 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink;
or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the
body more than clothes? **26** Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap
or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not
much more valuable than they?**27** Can any one of you by worrying add a single
hour to your life^[a]?

28 “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow.
They do not labor or spin. **29** Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his
splendor was dressed like one of these. **30** If that is how God clothes the grass
of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he
not much more clothe you—you of little faith? **31** So do not worry, saying, ‘What
shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ **32** For the
pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you
need them. **33** But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these
things will be given to you as well.