

Thanksgiving (2024)

Joel 2:21-27

Matthew 6:25-33

You've probably noticed as I have, that the holidays seem to be blending more and more in the fall. There were already some Christmas sales items in the stores before Halloween, but once Halloween was passed, Christmas decorations began popping up in the midst of Thanksgiving preparations.

More and more, the Thanksgiving meal is not limited to the fourth Thursday in November: Thanksgiving Day. Because of the scattering and fracturing of families, Thanksgiving Day can be celebrated this weekend or next weekend, the traditional Thursday, or Friday, or any day in between, or whenever people can get together. It's still a day for turkey and stuffing, sweet potatoes and pumpkin pie and an almost infinite menu of family and regional specialties.

It is still a day centered on giving thanks and much of that thanksgiving will focus on the food and on people getting together. But I'm sure you will agree that there is more to give thanks for than the traditional Thanksgiving meal with all the trimmings.

During this Thanksgiving week and this worship service dedicated to Thanksgiving, do you find it odd to hear a Gospel that talks about anxiety and worry and not about, well, thanks? At this time of year, we offer thanks for food, shelter, health, favorable weather, peace, and a whole raft of other blessings. Is it a bit jarring to hear Jesus tell us, "Do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things"?

So long as a family, an individual, or a nation hinges gratitude upon "stuff" -- even good, necessary-for-life "stuff," even "stuff" that we may rightly call blessings given by God, there's always that underlying fear that maybe tomorrow it won't be there. "Stuff" is notoriously fickle and unstable! Life can change in an instant. In Jesus' teaching from the Beatitudes, he warns against trusting in worldly wealth and not worrying about food, clothing, and shelter. There are more important realities than material needs.

I wonder if most people assume that it is just a natural part of life, part of being human. Maybe a certain amount of worry about tomorrow is even healthy. It motivates us to work and plan for the future. Of course, too much worry can create problems. But, always worrying about the future, about what to wear or what to eat, can become an unhealthy obsession. At that point, it becomes counter-productive.

I will confess that there are nights that I lay awake thinking about this, that, or the other thing. Sometimes, I'm sure, it crosses the line into worry. I think about things that I've said or done and wonder if I could have said them better or differently or done more or done something differently. I think about the health of the church and its future. But maybe I shouldn't; maybe I shouldn't worry about that.

"Do not be anxious....," Jesus says. Even churches may flourish like wildflowers -- and sometimes fade. Membership and giving ebb and flow. Yet, through it all, God's Kingdom is still faithfully preached. God's righteousness is sought and received in Word and Sacrament, fellowship and forgiveness. Good ministry is still being carried out in this Waupun United Methodist Church.

But where does one draw the line? When does a healthy concern for the future become a self-destructive obsession about tomorrow? If we are going to worry ourselves sick about food, drink, and clothing, we have misplaced our priorities. The kingdom of God should be our focus.

As we have probably seen in your Bible reading, if we are faithful to listening to what the Bible has to say to us today, we need to listen for God's timeless instruction and how it affects and shapes our life and faith today. When we look at ancient texts, we have to expand our modern thinking so that we might hear "the word of the Lord" speak to us from the heart of the prophet, Joel; hear his words speaking to us today even though first uttered so many years ago. We have to go deeper than a surface reading of those words.

When people find it difficult to be positive about life, the advice is often given to write down five things every night in a gratitude journal. However, it can be really hard to come up with even five things, especially if you have been depressed. But if you keep at it, it changes your perspective. You start seeing things that otherwise you might not notice or pay attention to. It's about

having an attitude of gratitude. Every moment of every day can be a moment of gratitude and there are sometimes specific moments that remind us to have an attitude of gratitude.

I still remember one incident from my previous appointment when I was driving out to the country church from the town church on an errand. It had just snowed and was still snowing and I took a curve too fast and slid off the road. In those few seconds, I was grateful there was no car coming from the opposite direction. I was grateful that there was no ditch on the other side of the road and no trees or mailboxes or anything else to crash into. I was grateful for an all-wheel drive vehicle that enabled me to pull off the snow-covered grass even after I had crossed the shoulder and back onto the road to continue on my way. I don't know if God had arranged all that, but a moment that could have been disaster turned into an opportunity and a reminder for gratitude.

But even there, there was an opportunity to be thankful not just for material things like all-wheel drive vehicles. Thanksgiving Day is more than an opportunity for a Thanksgiving based on plenty and prosperity. It is an opportunity to go deeper and beyond even what is not so obvious.

Verse 26 in our reading from the Book of Joel says, "You shall be satisfied." This passage as a whole refers to the satisfaction of our physical hunger, but it may imply more. There is more to being truly satisfied than having our stomachs full. Being satisfied has a strong spiritual component to it. Being satisfied goes beyond the idea that God wills to prosper his people with an increasing abundance of material things. Being satisfied may mean getting by with less, simplifying our tastes, and lowering the level of our needs. More importantly, being satisfied has more to do with the source of our satisfaction than anything else. The spiritually mature find satisfaction in the Lord rather than in the gifts that fall from his hands.

Our thanksgiving can be expressed in many ways. We can begin our thanksgiving by affirming God as Creator. As one hymn sings,

This is my Father's world,
O let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the ruler yet.

Secondly, we can thank God for a creation that is good. We can begin by remembering that the biblical view of creation is that it is good, simply because it is the work of God. The goodness of creation is underscored in Genesis 1. God saw that it was "good." The words are repeated over and over. After the appearance of water, land, plants, and light, God said, "It is good." After the appearance of fish, birds, and land animals again God said, "It is good." After the creation of man and woman God said, "It is very good." In the words of another hymn,

All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful:
The Lord God made them all.

I think Jesus wants his followers to ground their gratitude -- indeed, our lives -- in something a lot more solid than "stuff." "Strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness," he urges, "and all these things will be given to you as well" (v. 33). And he's already begun fleshing out what "the kingdom of God and his righteousness" are all about. They exist wherever and whenever God's name is kept holy by his people. They're present when God's will is accomplished to create, sustain, redeem, forgive, heal, reconcile, empower, and love us and all creation. God's kingdom and righteousness are shown when fearful, fallible people share the same forgiveness with one another that they have already received from the One who knows perfectly well what they need for daily existence. They're active when God lifts up those who hunger and thirst, who mourn, who are persecuted, and who humbly persevere through whatever "stuff" a broken world dishes their way. God's kingdom and righteousness are present whenever we place our hope and trust in God above any and all the good "stuff" -- the good blessings -- with which he has graced us.

Our gratitude—our thanksgiving—I believe, is certainly in the stuff of life but more so in shifting our focus from how much we have to be thankful *for*, to the One we are thankful *to*. It is good to give thanks for “the stuff,” but don’t stop there. Our beginning point and our ending point is the goodness of God, and our thanksgiving should lie there.