

Thanksgiving Eve, 11.24.2021

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Joel 2:21-27 Psalm 126; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Matthew 6:25-33

“Be Glad and Rejoice”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

It’s hard to imagine it is already the end of November, and that we are again celebrating Thanksgiving in the midst of an ongoing pandemic. This year, though we may be gathering with family and friends, it will still probably be a bit subdued, as we remain vigilant about keeping ourselves and others well. To say it another way, we continue to be worried – worried about the pandemic, our families, our community, the economy, and even our church, St. Mark’s. The worries of the pandemic and the ongoing worries of daily life continue to touch all of us.

The gospel reading appointed for Thanksgiving this year is from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, and seems tailor-made for people who have become quite used to worrying about everything. We may feel like worrying is about all we do. What does Jesus mean by telling us: “*Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear?*” Worry seems so central to who we are as human beings. How can Jesus say, “*Do not worry about your life?*”

The verb “worry” (*merimnate*) in the New Testament means to “anxiously worry,” to be fearful and afraid. Jesus is, of course, warning us against the distress and anxiety that comes with worry. These are emotions we know very well, and of course, they are emotions that distinguish us as human beings. Jesus is not forbidding that we be prudent or plan ahead with foresight anticipating the future. Such intentional actions actually build confidence and trust, helping steer us away from the anxiety and fear that Jesus is warning us against.

At the end of the gospel reading for today, Jesus suggests that the key to freeing ourselves from worry and anxiety is to place our cares and concerns upon God. In verse 33 he says, “*But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*” When we place our cares and concern upon God, we are given grace and faith to trust that God is with us in the daily challenges and concerns of life.

Jesus’ words are an encouragement to prayer that places our anxieties and worries upon God, rather than only upon ourselves. Jesus’ words remind us that the birds of the air and the lilies of the field instinctively and naturally rely upon the Creator, without even knowing it. Reliance upon God is what we are created for, and such reliance gives serenity and peace in the midst of life’s trials.

There is something tremendously liberating about today's reading for me, because I realize we are no different than the people to whom Jesus spoke two thousand years ago. Our world has, of course, changed and we have a much deeper understanding of the created and natural world. Medically we are able to overcome illness and disease in ways that would have been enviable to people of the ancient world. Yet, for all of our objective knowledge and rational perspective on the world, we are just as prone to worry, anxiety and fearfulness as the people to whom Jesus spoke. In a sense we are captive to our modernity; we have come to expect scientific and rational solutions to many of life's problems, often forgetting that the inner strength needed to live is spiritual as well as rational.

In other words, we are just as in need of God's healing and strengthening presence as every generation before us. Jesus is saying something profound about our human condition. We are created to know God and God's kingdom. Placing our cares and troubles upon God leads to a deep sense of peace and serenity. It allows us to work toward the future as well as accepting our own brokenness, because only when our hearts rest in God do we experience true liberation from our fears and worries about sin and death.

Sin and death, and the consciousness of these, are what make us human. The self-consciousness of our own sin and a time of our own dying are things only human beings are truly aware of. The birds and the lilies are not conscious of the limits of their brief lives, and they do not anticipate or fear for their future. As human beings we both fear and worry about what lies ahead, as well as not being able to let go of past mistakes and transgressions. We can make ourselves sick with worry about sin and death. Jesus comes to us saying, "*Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you.*" Jesus' words encourage us to believe in God's presence in the midst of brokenness and suffering, rather than being overwhelmed with anxiety about them.

When Jesus says, "*you of little faith*" he is calling us to trust in the presence of God in the midst of our trials, challenges and many worries. We are created to know God, and faith is another way of knowing that complements our rationality. We come wired to know God's power through faith.

The reading today from the prophet Joel begins with the words, "*Do not fear.*" Joel, too, is speaking to all creation, to human beings and animals – even to the soil, the earth from which we are made and to which we will return. Joel says, "*Do not fear...be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God.*" Like Jesus' words, "*you of little faith,*" Joel is reminding us that as we seek God, we find release from anxiety and worry, discovering the blessing of gladness and joy. So as we pause to

celebrate Thanksgiving, the good news is that though humanity has many worries and fears, we have also been created for gladness and joy in God's presence.

This evening's Thanksgiving Service has become a bit unusual in today's world. The religious dimension of Thanksgiving is being overcome by a cultural worldview offering little encouragement to seek the kingdom and righteousness of God. For example, the cornucopia or "horn of plenty," which decorates the sanctuary today, is a symbol of the abundance of God's creation – something which encourages us to offer prayers of thanksgiving. This is, of course, an ancient symbol dating back to Greek and Roman mythology as a sign of divine abundance and spiritual nourishment. It is today a common symbol of the autumn and its season of harvest.

If you were to choose a symbol of the American Thanksgiving holiday what would it be? Pumpkins and squash are symbols of the harvest season of the year, while autumn-colored corn and turkey are perhaps symbolic of the North American colonial narrative. Yet even these symbols for many come with baggage because the holidays can also certainly trigger anxiety and worry for many, or the holidays remind us of past events we would rather not remember.

There is, however, one symbol that has the power to reshape human community. It is the symbol of the table around which new community emerges through shared meals. Though Thanksgiving in the United States may be associated with certain foods, it's not what is really most important. When we were missionaries in Japan there were many years when local Japanese food was our Thanksgiving dinner. Though food is, of course important, it is an attitude of thankfulness that transforms us and the community gathered around the table. Jesus' example of the birds and the lilies is meant to encourage us to reliance and trust upon God, something other living things do unconsciously. Reliance and trust in God's grace is what can transform us and our table fellowship.

Thanksgiving for God's grace is what makes the shared community of this holiday meaningful. Gratitude for God's steadfast love creates thanksgiving in our hearts, urging us to share our tables, food, and gifts with others. Such gratitude also causes us to lament that there are many in our communities who go without food, do not have enough to eat, or who suffer from a deep loneliness without loving community. For many, the worry of not having enough is a constant companion.

The reading from 1 Timothy begins with the words, "*First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone.*" We are to remember all people in prayer with "*supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings.*" To people who often make intercession for ourselves, Paul encourages us pray for all people and leaders so that all of us might

lead a quiet and peaceable life in “godliness and dignity.”

So when you sit down at the table for Thanksgiving dinner or any meal, remember to offer thanksgiving for all things. The word translated as “thanksgiving” in the reading from Timothy is none other than the word “Eucharist.” The word “thanksgiving” or “Eucharist” reminds us that at the Lord’s table we experience God’s grace as our Lord comes to us in the bread and in the cup. At the Lord’s table we are gathered us into a community of grace, as our worries and anxieties are transformed into faith and trust.

Christians are people, who after being fed from the Lord’s table, set tables in daily life with thanksgiving for others, for family, friends, strangers and the hungry. The table Christ sets for us redefines every table we sit around – and Jesus is the silent guest at all our meals. Christ loves and cherishes each of us in his Holy Supper, freeing us from the worries of sin and death so that with gladness and joy we might live for others. Christ feeds us with spiritual food, his very body and blood, so that we might set tables for others, building community and feeding the hungry around us in this world.

This is what we do as a church. Jesus feeds us with his body so that we might become his body in this world. This Thanksgiving, be glad and rejoice that God is with you. We may be in an ongoing pandemic with many challenges, but Jesus comes to free us from the fears and worries of sin and death. Be glad and rejoice. A blessed Thanksgiving to you all. Amen.