

Thanksgiving Service, 11/24/05
Matthew 6:25-33
Jamie Kepros

What a beautiful, comforting passage of scripture. This segment of the Sermon on the Mount presents us with a poetic and moving reminder of God's providential care for all creatures—us included. And on this day of celebration, of great Thanksgiving, it is good to remember God's awesome care for us.

But there is also a challenge for us in this passage. We are being prompted: Do not worry. In fact, in the NRSV translation, the word worry is used four times! Do not worry about your life, your clothes or food. Can you by worrying increase your life? We know deeply what this word-worry-means in our lives. I don't want to spoil our appetites, but the short list goes something like:

health, family, income, mortgage, war, politics, poverty, interest rates, morality, oppression, jobs, gas, earthquake, hurricane, tornado, avian flu.

And, of course, I could go on and on. Most of us are way past worrying about just food and clothing. But I think we hear the message of this passage nonetheless. Jesus reminds us – do not worry, look at life, look at nature-the birds and the flowers-and remember your place in it all.

But then this heartening little passage sneaks up on us and leaves us with the line: “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Humm. Troublesome little line. The implication could be: if we're striving for the kingdom of God we will be provided for. So if we're not striving for God will we not then have basic provisions? Even more troublesome, those who do not have basic provisions must not be seeking first the kingdom of God. And as Art Ziemann from Church World Service reminded us on Sunday, the majority of the world's population does not have what we would consider to be basic provisions of food and clothing.

This can get a little sticky, which is often the case when literalizing a poetic passage. And even though we don't tend to do that in this community, it is worthwhile to pause and remind ourselves what can happen if we slip into the notion of divine favor. This type of thinking has for far too long supported systems which allow the comfortable to stay comfortable and the poor to stay poor. And, indeed, the Pilgrims who we honor and remember today did believe that their earthly material success or failure was a direct result of divine favor or displeasure.

So what about those Pilgrims? How might they have encountered this passage? We can't know for sure, of course, but imagine yourself out there at Plimouth Plantation. Sharon and I took the opportunity to visit Plimouth Plantation while we were still out East. What an amazing experience. There are two things I remember clearly about Plimouth Plantation, the bitter wind and the isolation. Windy isolation. By isolation I mean, you look this way and there's ocean, you look this way and there's trees-wilderness, and that's it. The Pilgrim's life was rough. Especially in those first years. There was much death, illness and struggle. Thank God for community. Thank God for a tiny village of little huts scattered around each other with people scattered around doing the days work. Thank God for work – to keep us busy in this harsh, unrelenting landscape. Thank God for the harvest and the hunt – for the food on our table. We look behind us and there is the ocean and memories of perilous journey. We look before us and all is wilderness. But we have our scripture and we have a hearth to gather round and read it. Thank God. Jesus in the book of Matthew tells us: do not worry about our life – what we will eat or drink – or where our clothes will come from, for if we strive for the kingdom of God, all will be provided. And we've been shown the way to a land, a land where we can be free – free to be a community and to worship as we will. We will not worry, we will work.

And the rest is history, as they say.

I got caught up recently in a conversation that seems to happen every year around this time. The: life was so much harder back then and we have it so much easier now and we don't appreciate what we have-conversation. I bet a lot of you have had this dialogue before. But I struggled in it this year, a little voice kept gnawing at me saying: "I don't know that we do have it easier." I mean, sure I can go to King Soopers to pick up my perfectly packaged turkey (or tofurkey). I don't have to get up before dawn, clean my double-barrel shotgun and walk 5 miles on a hunt for it. But is King Soopers easier? To give thanks for food that we didn't gather, that we didn't harvest...it may just be harder to really – get- -that- Thanksgiving.

And it is easy to romanticize the past, but there is something undeniably powerful about the image of the Pilgrims reaching forward into their future, into that wilderness, with struggle and death threatening and none but hard work and God as companions on the journey.

And don't we, in this present day, have a wilderness before us as well? A wilderness of worry. A hungry world, political upheaval and violence, natural disaster, confusion in our own hearts. And all those other things that populate our personal wilderness. So thick at times that the horizon of our lives is completely blocked out.

But as the lilies of the field and the birds in the air – here we are anyway. Despite it all. We are amazing people. We've built into our calendar a day of Thanksgiving. A day to be together. We've pulled ourselves up to the hearth – to the very heart of God – to listen to this scripture today. Thank God for our community. Thank God for our church, for our town with its scattered houses, schools and people. Thank God for the harvest and our abundance.

And through all our difficulties – our worries – there is a Spirit among us here – that same Pilgrim Spirit prompting us – just as Matthew's gospel does- Do Not Worry. Remember – we will not worry, we will work. Giving thanks always. Amen.