

Don't Worry, Be Thankful

Our Gospel passage comes from Matthew's collection of Jesus's teachings early in his ministry. It falls about halfway between the Beatitudes and the wisdom of building your house on solid rock, not sand. The whole compilation takes up three full chapters of Matthew's Gospel, and it's all good advice. Jesus's admonition not to worry about our lives, not to fret over what we are to eat, drink or wear, seems especially appropriate as we celebrate Thanksgiving and prepare for the hectic Christmas season.

Jesus is right to warn us about worrying too much. As our Lord observes, worry cannot add even a single hour to our lives and, as anyone who's prone to it knows, worry is a thief of life. Worry can steal endless hours that could be given over to enjoying friends and family, doing productive work, or engaging in recreation, contemplation, rest, and prayer. But as anyone who's prone to worry also knows, giving it up can be a lot harder than Jesus might expect.

I say this coming from a long line of prodigious worriers. My cousin Liddy Gerchman Barlowe, a minister in the United Church of Christ, observed in her grandmother's eulogy that when our family wants to say, "I love you," we say instead, "I'm worried about you." Everyone at the funeral laughed because we all knew it was true. For us and, I suspect, many families, love and worry go hand in hand. Our family is not much given to flowery declarations of devotion to the people we love. Instead, we ask pointedly when our loved ones last ate a proper meal, got a good night's sleep, or remembered to take an umbrella to shield them from the rain or a sweater against the cold. We grumble at the people we love, pointing out the risks of traveling in bad weather, staying up too late to finish a school project or watch a movie, or wasting time on frivolous pursuits that would be better spent studying or working. We may not be the most entertaining or effusive folks but, by God, we are *concerned*. Maybe you, too, can relate.

It doesn't help that we live in a culture that sets absurd standards for how we live and what we do. Take Thanksgiving, for instance. Thanks in part to Norman Rockwell and Martha Stewart, a significant percentage of the U.S. population thinks it's not Thanksgiving unless there's an enormous crowd gathered around a dining room table that groans under the weight of a turkey the size of a T-Rex and at least a dozen side dishes. Heaven forbid anyone at the table should go without their personal Thanksgiving favorite, be it Mom's green bean casserole, Aunt Lucille's lasagna or Uncle Charlie's famous crab mac 'n' cheese. And heaven forbid twice over that whoever's cooking the feast might decide to simplify things or try something different this year. Professional chefs have said for at least a decade that turkey cooks more evenly if you cut it up and roast it in pieces. But in many households, bringing anything less than the whole bird to the table is tantamount to sacrilege. Even carving in the kitchen is a concession to practicality that some condemn as an unthinkable breach of holiday tradition.

You've undoubtedly figured out that I'm making these points (mostly) in jest. Still, there are more somber aspects of our holiday traditions that need to be addressed. Concerns about whether a turkey is perfectly cooked and the accompanying gravy is smooth as silk are definitely first world worries. For too many of our neighbors, that perfect Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving dinner is an unattainable ideal. Here at St. Luke's, our food pantry is currently providing about ninety households with needed food every week. This year, we were blessed with donations of over one hundred turkeys. We happily distributed them among our neighbors, along with fresh produce, as many eggs as we could get, and other traditional trimmings like cranberry sauce and desserts. It's a blessing to serve our community this way, and the volunteers who run and staff the food pantry deserve to be on the fast track for canonization. But I worry that demand for our food pantry services has approximately doubled in recent years and will likely increase still more

in the years ahead, perhaps exceeding our ability to meet it. Dearly as I love Jesus, there's no way I can keep from worrying about the needs of our community, and I can only pray that he'll forgive me for failing to live according to his good advice.

But there are a few things about this passage that give me hope for myself and all the other chronic worriers out there. First, Jesus told us not to worry about our own lives; he never said we shouldn't worry about the lives of others. If we put this passage alongside his Great Commandment to love God with all our hearts and all our minds and all our strength and love our neighbors as ourselves, maybe it's okay to worry about our neighbors' welfare. Honestly, if we are to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God, I don't see how we can avoid it. In my opinion, you can't do justice if injustice fails to concern you, and I don't think Jesus intended that, when faced with injustice, we should simply sit on our hands, whistle a happy tune, and wait for God to make things right.

Second, Jesus told us not to worry, but he didn't tell us not to work. He promised that God would give us everything we need. In my experience, that's usually true. But the things God provides are not always the things we might prefer, nor are they the things he might be able to give us if we rolled up our sleeves and helped the Holy Spirit bring the Kingdom of God to earth. And that's where the church comes in.

To me, this passage rings with a certain youthful naivete. Incarnate Son of the Most High or not, Jesus was new to ministry when he delivered his three-chapter treatise on how to live as a faithful child of our loving God. Although he had grown up under humble circumstances, if Joseph was able to keep food on the family's table, Jesus might not yet have understood what it is to be chronically hungry. He seems to have figured it out though because, after his resurrection, Jesus gave only one command to his dear friend Peter, the rock of his future church:

“feed my sheep.” Not “build magnificent cathedrals, write beautiful liturgy, perform spectacular music, and commission great art in my most holy Name.” Christianity has done all of those things, and the world is richer for it. But the church is still called to fulfill Jesus's command to feed his sheep. Perhaps, if we succeed in doing that, we can worry a little less about all the rest.

And we still have to consider how to live without worry about our own lives as Jesus instructs us to do. I don't think we can or should wait passively for God to drop everything into our laps. We have brains and hands, and I imagine he expects us to use them. But perhaps we can live our lives with a little less concern about how perfectly we get things done. Norman Rockwell painted an idealized America that never really existed, and Martha Stewart marketed a fantasy of “gracious living” that took a small army of employees and consultants to create. Today's Internet influencers sell a similar dream, and they never put their outtakes on display. Instead of fretting overachieving perfection in our holiday preparations, we might serve Jesus better by focusing on making sure that everyone has enough to eat.

Almost anyone who regularly cooks Thanksgiving dinner has a story about the terrible turkey that nearly ruined a particular meal. The nice folks at Butterball's tip line have horror stories that could turn you vegetarian. But again, in my experience, one year's failed dish usually becomes the joke of next year's gathering. The lumpy gravy, sticky mashed potatoes or underbaked dinner rolls don't really matter. What matters is who's at the table and being grateful for all the good things that God lavishes over our lives and encourages us to share with one another. So tomorrow, enjoy the precious time with the people you love. Try to avoid arguments that might ruin the day – this year has been tense enough that we need to give each other a little extra grace. Give thanks for your blessings and, as you can, spare a thought for those who are less fortunate. Or, as Jesus might say, don't worry, be thankful. Amen.