

Thanksgiving

Sermon preached at St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, November 22, 2018

Thanksgiving Day

Matthew 6:25-33 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you-- you of little faith? Therefore 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; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

When I think of Thanksgiving, I often remember one of my favorite children's movies: the Veggie Tale "Madame Blueberry." Veggie Tales are computer animated cartoons that tell Bible stories and other stories with Christian themes. The main characters of these stories are animated vegetables: Bob the Tomato, Larry the Cucumber, Archibald the Asparagus and others. The whole thing sounds pretty corny ☺, but I find these cartoons to be remarkably well written stories with fantastic music and hilariously funny dialogue.

"Madame Blueberry" is a story narrated by two French Peas (Jean-Claude and Philippe) "Now Madame Blueberry was a sad little berry. She lived by herself in a house in a tree." She was sad because though she had wonderful things, her things weren't as nice as her friends' things (or so she thought). Her friends had the best in new silverware, the finest crock pots and artwork—all the best stuff. So she was sad. As the show puts it, "she was a very blue berry..." Then three salesmen come to visit (green onions, I think). They convince her that the key to happiness is lots more stuff, and they introduce her to the "enormous land of retail" known as the "Stuff Mart." Soon, endless trains of gadgets and furniture ship to her tree house: a refrigerator to keep extra mashed potatoes, a ratchet set and pliers and surround-sound amplifiers, sofas, appliances, lots and lots of stuff.

During her buying frenzy, she meets other people who have hardly any stuff at all. She is puzzled, because these people seem to be happy—even thankful in the midst of their need. She discovers, as the show's theme says, "a thankful heart is a happy heart." Unfortunately, she realizes this just as the last air compressor is hoisted into her tree house, which collapses under the weight of all that stuff! She loses all her new purchases and everything she had before. Yet as the movie ends, she is laughing and smiling and happy indeed as she enjoys the company of her new friends, those others who could take joy in the gifts of God. She could take joy in God's love for her and for them. She is happy and thankful even though she has lost so much.

Thanksgiving is the quintessential American holiday. On Thanksgiving, we gather together to celebrate our abundance. I would guess that most of us here will gather around an ample feast of turkey, stuffing and that very traditional cylinder of cranberry sauce, still ribbed from the can before being sliced into perfect cranberry sauce discs. I imagine thankfulness is easy around such

a feast. I wonder, however, can we be as thankful during the rest of the year? Can we be thankful when times are lean or when we are worried about the future?

What would it be like to celebrate Thanksgiving in places ravaged by famine, devastated by disease or torn by war? Consider Thanksgiving in a country like Syria or in Central America or South East Asia. Or consider places in the United States just minutes from our doorstep—places like Peoplestown in Atlanta or West Cobb County, where many kids wear second hand clothes and seek food on a day by day basis. Can they be thankful in the midst of their need?

These people are actually very much like those to whom Jesus preached his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus did not preach to powerful Rome who stripped conquered countries of their wealth. Jesus did not preach to king Herod who built palaces while his people went hungry. Jesus preached to peasants. These were peasants who worried about famine this year or next year—about the burden of Roman taxes and the hardships of oppression. We are very used to hearing Jesus' words, but can we hear them through the ears of these needy peasants?

Place yourselves in their shoes for a moment and listen to what Jesus says to these desperately poor people: *“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?... Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.”* If your heavenly father cares for the birds and the flowers with such abundance, how much more will he feed you, his beloved children?

If Jesus can ask these poor peasants not to worry about the future, what does he ask of us? Perhaps most of us are not worried about having shelter or food to eat. We have enough clothes to keep us warm. Yet we face our own worries. Many of us daily toil and spin with anxiety. Many of us are rich in things and poor in soul. Sometimes our abundance masks loneliness, broken relationships, isolation and spiritual hunger. Sometimes our plans for our lives are shaken and turned upside down, and we have to live more day by day. Can we be as thankful and trust God when we don't know what tomorrow will bring?

Sometimes we worry “will we have enough?” Will we have enough stuff? Will we have enough peace and civility? Will we have enough safety? Will we have enough family and community?

Instead of birds and flowers, let's consider some people that we know. Several people from our church have gathered together frequently over the past year to pray together and consider how God might be calling us to serve Christ in the world. They learned that hunger is a larger problem in our area than one might think. Even in school districts close to us, there are many families that rely on school lunch programs. And just a few school districts away, the needs are even greater. So starting in February, St. Peter & St. Paul will participate in a network of churches to provide boxes of groceries once per month to needy people. The program is called “There's Hope for the Hungry” and you can get involved. These people might worry about the

future and worry about what they will eat. And yet, their heavenly father provides for them through us and other faithful churches.

Many of you already have encountered homeless families from Cobb County who stay with us when we host families through Family Promise. These families might worry about the future and where they will stay and sleep. And yet, their heavenly father provides for them through us and other Family Promise congregations. Those who host these families and learn to know them discover that God provides more than shelter. When we sit and eat dinner with them and help the kids with school, and talk with their parents about their blessings and challenges, we discover that they are not alone, and we are not alone. Even the rich can worry about the future, about isolation and loneliness, and yet, our heavenly father feeds us with friends and brothers and sisters in Christ.

Likewise, we see Stephen Ministers in this place reaching out to those in crisis, worried about the future and how they will move forward in life. And yet, their heavenly father provides for them with compassion and prayer and reassurance of God's grace. Whether we've walked with a Stephen Minister or not, we know those times overcome by our worries about the future. And yet, just as our heavenly father provides for those care receivers, our heavenly father provides for us as well.

This is the power of relationships in Christ. It is no coincidence that Madame Blueberry found joy in the company of others who thanked God for their simple blessings. This is the power of God at work in the Christian Community, not only to provide food and shelter, but also relationships of depth and trust and growth and hope, animated and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

When we see what God is doing for others, we see more clearly what God is doing for us. When we seek relationships in Christ, we find the power of God sustaining us as well. When we seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, then all the things we need will be given to us by God as well.

Jesus calls us to be thankful in times of abundance and in times of need. Jesus calls us not to worry, even when the world around us is full of noise and turmoil, or when we cannot see the way forward. For our heavenly father provides for us, and when we seek to follow him as king, we will find all the blessings we need, and plenty more to share.

I pray that you will come to know and trust God more personally and more deeply in the days ahead. I pray that you will see the abundance that God has given you and be thankful. I pray that you will deepen your relationships with each other in Christ, and from that abundance, share those relationships with a world hungry for God's grace.

God bless you this Thanksgiving and always!