

“Don’t Worry, Re-focus”

A Sermon Shared with St. Andrew’s United Church on October 7, 2018 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:24-34

by The Rev. Dave Le Grand

I’d like to begin by sharing the prayer:

May this brief Message be truthful, faithful, Holy Source, but, most importantly, may you open us to dialogue about how your perplexing, sometimes maddening Scriptures might speak to each of us in our unique circumstances. Coax us, beckon us into helping your Dream to be realized; your kin-dom grounded in unconditional love, healing and a radical new order of things where the last shall be first and the first, last. Amen.

So my preaching style will be conversational; hopefully provocative, and hopefully also raising more questions that invite us to conversation, rather than giving pat answers. One more thing...When I provoke you, and you might feel I’m talking to you, please remember this: agitation, the feeling of being provoked, nudged, cajoled, is surely the same feeling that many of Jesus’ disciples had as they followed him. My belief about the power of the Bible, and especially the stories of and teachings of Jesus, is that they are profoundly challenging to our comfortable reality.

“I” am comfortable, and as I preach, I feel the brunt of Jesus’ challenging message squarely on me... As you and I are also invited to remember that we are God’s children.

Challenging messages like today’s, through the lens of Matthew, Jesus says: *You cannot serve God and wealth... Do not worry...* You might wonder if there is a Thanksgiving message in there. I believe that there is.

Let me share a confession - I... am a *worrier*. Doing ministry in a different new church after 12 years serving another congregation; well there is a lot of potential for fretting.

Ok, having gotten that off my chest, I *don’t* know you, but I would guess that this sanctuary is **full of worriers**. We fret about money, about dysfunctional relationships, and how about waiting for that appointment with the specialist, where we fill in all the uncertainty with speculation that is likely far worse a nightmare than the facts surely will be.

Worshiping here, in this downtown context, we cannot help but name the fact that there are people near and far who, a majority in our world, who face unimaginable daily choices and worries, often feel that they have the power to make choices about their economic nor health circumstances.

Today’s Gospel reading is part of Matthew’s take on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, beginning a chapter earlier. Jesus opens with the “Blessed are you...” declarations, The Beatitudes...

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Jesus is speaking to the majority in our world carrying burdens. Jesus is also speaking to his disciples, and us, as he points to the times when we resort to worry we are like the Gentiles. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus several times asks his disciples, kind of being facetious: do you really want to be like the Gentiles? (If you wonder what a Gentile is, our Biblical New Testament writers referred to all non-Jews as Gentiles.) Jesus in Matthew felt a special

mission to what he calls "lost sheep of Israel".¹ Truth is, Jesus is alluding to us. We, like the disciples, often just don't get Jesus. We want to finesse Jesus to fit our particular lifestyle choices, rather than fitting our lifestyle choices with Jesus' teachings.

But to give us a little bit of credit, it's easy for Jesus to tell all who want to follow him not to worry, but isn't it impossible *not* to worry? As much as we would like to accept at face value Jesus' words that God will provide all we need if we just trust God, our hearts are breaking for the families of the more than 1,600 dead after the massive earthquake in Indonesia.

It is simplistic to simply take from this the message that if we fully trust in God, we will be provided for. But, Bible scholars do point us to the opening phrase: *You cannot serve God and wealth* (or other translations "mammon"). I think we can all agree that we are pummelled by warped, me-centred, money-centred, materialistic values. There are masters in our world demanding our devotion, and they are neither kind, nor do they care about us. Jesus is worried about the master of wealth & status in his time, and that master still enjoys power and circulates in our media. We need to name that master, or perhaps many masters, here. Jesus calls his disciples, and us, to make a choice:

Go with the master who tempts us towards individualism: play with our electronic devices, buy into advertising that tells us that I-alone matter, the importance of community takes a back seat in our culture **OR**, follow the voice of the Creator who continually gathers the lost sheep of Israel back into community. It takes work, commitment, compromise, to be in community.

We could be willing slaves to the masters in our culture, who teach us what success is, the master whose narrative tempts our children and grandchildren, and perhaps us, as well, tempts us to think that we should aspire to become rich, beautiful by a standard portrayed on TV and in movies.

OR... we can give thanks to our Creator, who through Jesus, tells us, and every human being, that we are God's children, unconditionally loved just as we are.

I have had many wonderful family experiences on Thanksgiving. Many nostalgic moments with the family I love, and gorging myself on turkey and *tatees* as my old great uncle Will always called mashed potatoes. But somehow my most sacred Thanksgivings were the ones where I was with people for whom a Thanksgiving meal enjoyed with others, or just enjoying a healthy meal for them was rarely, or NEVER an option.

There I was, at the Kingston Youth Shelter, serving turkey, with young people, most who have not seen their parents in years, most who work the ruthless streets every night, most who have been addicted to substances since childhood. There they are, eating as if it is their last meal. It puts my worries in perspective at a time like that. Pulling us out of our self-absorbed, comfortable realities, when we are taught a lesson about why those vulnerable that Jesus refers to in chapter 5 of Matthew are truly blessed and theirs will be the kin-dom of God. At a moment with someone vulnerable in your life this Thanksgiving, maybe you too will understand God's kin-dom.² Amen

¹ Emerson Powery. Working Preacher. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=841 Mt 6:24-34 Feb 2011

² My main source was *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* – Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration. Theologians: Jason Byassee, Barbara J. Essex, & Greg Carey.