**Matthew 6:25-33**

**Thanksgiving Sunday**

**Parkminster United Church – Sunday, October 10, 2021**

Happy Thanksgiving to each of you! I want you to think for a moment about the Thanksgiving gatherings that have been a part of your lives over the years. What were the traditions, the people, the sights, the smells, which made Thanksgiving for you?

For me, Thanksgiving as a child always included a traditional turkey dinner with our extended family. I’ve told my family’s infamous turkey story before but this year, another element of our Thanksgiving has been stuck in my mind. You see, I come from a family of worriers. A long line of overthinkers. Some of my childhood memories of extended family gatherings at times such as Thanksgiving are memories of my poor mum who worried about balancing all the Thanksgiving planning all while feeling overwhelmed with the demands of being a busy minister and parent.

I wish I didn't worry so much. I might even qualify as a compulsive worrier. Like I said, I come by it honestly. On the outside I like to think that I'm affable and easy going. That's a genuine part of my personality. And my life is full of many good things. Like so many of us, this Thanksgiving, I have a lot to be thankful for. Still, despite a friendly exterior and a fortunate life, on the inside my engines are always running. And so, I worry.

At night I find it hard to locate the off switch for my brain, and so I've become a predictably fitful sleeper.

While some of my worries are superficial in nature, many are not. Powerful societal forces feed my worries. Living during a pandemic. The manipulation and power that a politics of fear can have on us. An economy that legitimizes greed, creates artificial wants and needs, perfects advertising techniques that shape our attitudes, and makes sure that money, no matter how much or little you have, is a worry. No one is immune from these and other societal forces. I know I'm not. I try not to be too hard on myself. Some worry is part of human nature. We ought to worry about some things – and especially living in these strange times, it’s hard not to worry.

So even though this Thanksgiving weekend calls us to intentionally pause and express gratitude, I’m aware of the tension between celebrating our many blessings while honouring the valid feelings of worry and anxiety while living and moving in a broken, hurting world.

Then we get to today’s gospel passage – selected as one of the lectionary readings for this Thanksgiving - and we’re told not to worry. To be honest, I didn’t know whether I was supposed to laugh or be a little offended that we are instructed not to worry about our lives. Really Jesus? Don’t worry? That’s difficult in the best of times, add a pandemic to the mix and we’re supposed to just roll with this teaching?

Moment after moment this week that this call not to worry echoed in my mind and got me thinking that this must be one of the hardest calls in the gospel.

Because how can we not worry?  How can we not look at the realities of our lives – the things that cause us stress, anxiety, and pain, particularly the things that we have absolutely no control over – and not worry?  It is such a natural response to our humanity.

It’s not like Jesus never had anything worry about.  It is not like Jesus never faced any situation that caused him stress, anxiety, or pain. Today’s passage is part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, and it is towards the beginning of the gospel; Jesus just spent 40 days in the wilderness being tempted.  He knows how hard it is to be human.

And yet, Jesus says these words: “That’s why I tell you not to worry about your life…”

The thing is, I like to think Jesus understands – truly understands – the depth of what he is saying.  He knows how it feels to bear the burden of our own humanity and still let go of the worries that overwhelm us.  He knows this will, in fact, be easier said than done.

It is worth noting that Jesus was talking about something very specific here.  This portion of the Sermon on the Mount follows the part where Jesus talks about not storing up for ourselves treasures on earth and keeping our focus on God.  And so, I do think, in many ways, Jesus is talking about money and material things when he tells the disciples not to worry and to look to a broader vision.  Look at the examples he uses:  He says to look at the birds in the sky, because they do not sow or reap and yet, God feeds them.  Then he says to consider the wildflowers, because they do not work or spin and yet they grow.

I suppose the remarkably simple lesson in all of this is that there is beauty in relinquishing some control, as difficult as that can be for us, and being open and vulnerable to the Spirit. This passage calls us to open our minds and hearts to God, to not be so afraid to let go, and trust in the divine presence.

This may feel a bit simple or even cliché – but there is a depth to this. In a time where each week sometimes feels like too much is coming at us at once – when we are overwhelmed by things that are out of our control, things that cause us to worry, things that call us to wait and see what will happen – these words of the gospel provide some grounding.

We all have worries – whether they are related to our health, finances, work, family, or the world.  Life is not always easy; in fact, it very rarely is.  But we do have this promise:  This promise that even amidst our worries, we are not alone. And we see this all the time here at Parkminster. We are reminded that we are not alone in our struggles through a cheerful card or email that we receive. In the warmth and comfort of a prayer shawl. In the reassuring voice over the telephone. In uplifting music that soothes are spirits. In the faces we see on our cameras smiling back at us each week.

And this is a promise that is steadfast in our faith, no matter what else might change around us.  I believe Jesus speaks these words in the Sermon on the Mount – one of his earliest recorded teachings to the disciples – because he wants them to understand what this new covenant means, what it will mean to follow him, what it means to have this very human connection to God and each other, and for God to have this very human connection to all of us.

Because remember the amazing thing about this whole Jesus story: Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us.

This life is not easy and there will be moments that overwhelm us with worry and fear. But the gift of faith is also the gift of community. Of knowing that we do not have to face our struggles alone. We have each other. We have the promise of God that we are not alone.

We are not alone. Even amid our worries. Even amid our pain. This feels especially poignant to be able to say that this morning and look over at Joe and Neil in person. Something we look forward to all doing as we are able and as we are ready soon enough. But equally I give thanks for and celebrate the power of the online community that has held us together over these many months. So many of you have shared that our gatherings have helped sustain you in the frightening and loneliest times of the pandemic. There is something deeply meaningful in the connections we have with each other. There is something about being together in the many ways we form community at Parkminster and living out our mission and ministry in this world together.

Perhaps that’s the reason Jesus begins to close out this teaching with this discussion about not worrying. Because Jesus is getting ready to head out with the disciples to do some real, hard, get-your-hands-dirty kind of ministry.  And they are not going to do it alone.  Like us, they are doing it together.

And so, as we come together this Thanksgiving Sunday – still online – but with the beauty and reassurance of this beloved and familiar sanctuary and think about the challenge of this gospel passage, I would remind you of the people that are gathered in this online space.  This is your community, your church, your Body of Christ.  When Jesus says, “do not worry” he knows that this is much easier done in community than it is by ourselves. So do not try to do it alone.

I know there is a lot going on right now – both here at the church and in everyone’s lives.  So, it is a good reminder for us today to pause for a moment and let Jesus’ words sit on our hearts: “Do not worry” and to give thanks on this day for the blessings of each other.

We are not alone. For that, I am most thankful. Thanksgiving blessings to you all.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

Rev. Heather Power