

“On the Far Side...of Giving Thanks”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for October 7th 2018 (Thanksgiving/World Communion Sunday)
by Foster Freed

Matthew 6: 25-33

Jesus has a way of pushing our buttons! He certainly has a way of pushing **my** buttons. And nowhere...nowhere is that more the case than at Thanksgiving. Then again—to be fair...the place held—within most Canadian Protestant churches by the celebration of Thanksgiving, has always struck me as a somewhat peculiar one. Unlike Christmas, Epiphany, Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost: Thanksgiving is not a specifically Christian feast and yet...

...it is hardly surprising that such a feast would emerge from within cultures (I am thinking here of both the U.S. and Canada)...cultures that were most certainly shaped by the Christian Gospel: cultures, in short, in which the blessing of God's bounty...

...specifically the bounty manifested in the richness and generosity of a good harvest...

...surely it is not at all surprising that cultures that bear the stamp of the Gospel, however imperfectly, would be cultures that would recognize the rightness of designating a yearly occasion on which to express gratitude for God's bounty. Nor should we therefore be surprised when we discover that the appointed readings on this occasion, reflect precisely those themes. And so, had we stuck to the assigned Old Testament reading for this morning's gathering, the appropriate note of harvest-bounty would have been struck with all the expected fanfare.

*The threshing floors shall be full of grain;
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.
you shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
and praise the name of the Lord your God,
who has dealt wondrously with you.ⁱ*

Had we instead focused on our Psalm—the 126th—those same notes would have been well struck!

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy...*

Nor would we have been led astray by our epistle reading. On the contrary, the “T” word—thanksgiving—makes a notable appearance in that text. Writing to his young

associate Timothy, Paul urges that *supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for everyone!*ⁱⁱⁱ But then!

Then, we arrive at the Gospel text. And that's where things fly off the rails. Drawn from Matthew's Gospel...drawn from the middle chapter of the Sermon on the Mount...we quickly discover that there is no mention here of harvest...no mention, whatsoever, of gratitude...no mention of thanksgiving. Instead, we're given a lecture on anxiety: a stern talking to concerning the foolhardiness of our wasting time and energy being anxious about our lives. And please note: whereas many of us have no doubt taught our own children not to be anxious about some of the **foolish** things over which we human beings so often choose to be anxious...

...our looks, our wealth, our status...

...Jesus, here, isn't telling us to avoid anxiety about that sort of distracting trivia. No! He's looking at the things upon which our lives actually depend: food, drink, shelter...and telling us not to be anxious about any of those things. Do the folks out there in the "tent-city" know something we middle-class types have forgotten? Are we so caught up in lives that seek to nail down our next meal, our next rent-check, our next mortgage payment, that we are actually missing the boat? Do the worries we pour into keeping our lives intact, actually bear witness to a profound disconnect between the anxious ways in which we actually live, and the Way of Jesus Christ, in which trust in God drives out all fear, all doubt, all anxiety? Can we be said to be thankful at all, unless we are doing so on the far side of Giving thanks?: on that side of giving thanks in which every worry, every concern, every anxiety has been handed over to the God in whom we are called to place our trust, without even a shadow of doubt.

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Well: like the man said on the way in, our Lord has a wonderful way of pushing our buttons. Not, I think, because he enjoys making us squirm...but because there are profound questions with which he wishes his followers to engage. And yes: for someone such as myself, showing up on a Thanksgiving Sunday to pay my respects to my Maker, utter a few polite prayers, sing a handful of magnificent Thanksgiving hymns, and then go home for a festive meal...

...for someone such as myself, that seems like a pretty simple formula for making a Fall Harvest Festival even more delightful than it already would be. But then I show up here...and **He** wants to talk about anxiety. Trust me—as someone who in my second year of seminary experienced a “panic attack”...

...if you are not familiar with a panic attack, suffice it to say that a “panic attack” makes ordinary, run-of-the-mill anxiety, seem like a stroll through the park on a perfect spring day...

...for someone like me, the mere mention of the “a” word—even in a context in which I’m being told NOT to be anxious...can send my mind racing in all sorts of unwelcome directions and into all kinds of worrying corners. And what, pray tell, does that have to do with gratitude? Cannot an anxious person still express gratitude? Or is the point here that those who are still worrying about what they will eat, what they will drink, what they will wear...exhibit lives so lacking in trust, that perhaps their gratitude must also be brought under suspicion. Although...

...although if we are going to be perfectly honest and perfectly truthful: no one here is stranger to the fact that there **are** times and places when it would be quite impossible **not** to be anxious about our daily bread, **not** to be anxious about quenching our thirst, **not** to be anxious about the clothes we lack, **not** to be anxious about the shelter that evades us. Most of us have parents or grandparents who struggled to survive the great-depression. And most of us can still recall the images of starving children in places such as Biafra in the 1970s: places where natural disaster—or human perversity—manage to bring forth utter barrenness where there ought to have been only bounty.

And I was struck, earlier this week: struck when I consulted a wonderful modern commentary on Matthew’s Gospel, written by Presbyterian scholar F. Dale Bruner. Bruner has much to say in support of this text: making the point that we middle-class, first-world, Western Christians **do** tend to build well-fortressed lives, lives in which we place far greater trust in our own ingenuity than in the bounty of Creator. And yet even Bruner has no choice but to acknowledge—and he does so to his credit—that when he lived and taught as a missionary Professor in the Philippines, this text troubled him deeply. He writes:

“At first glance the command (whether comforting or challenging) not to be anxious about food or clothes can offend. As a missionary in the Philippines I was convinced this text could not be preached to the poor; it is cruel to tell the poor not to be anxious about having enough to eat or wear.” I am going to repeat that so that it sinks in. “As a missionary in the Philippines I was convinced that this text could not be preached to the poor; it is cruel to tell the poor not to be anxious about having enough to eat or wear.”

Amen to that! But amen, as well, to those who might wonder how realistic it is to tell a new-mom not to be anxious about her baby’s well-being the first time he runs a fever? How realistic to tell a patient, just before surgery, not to be anxious about the procedure’s outcome? How realistic—indeed how helpful—to preach against anxiety when the yet to be written essay is due, the job-interview for that dream-position is going poorly, when the dreaded phone call contains even worse news than you feared? *Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life!* Really? Truly?

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Well. Let's just say that this is one of those frequent occasions when I am reminded of the old saying—one I have myself used far too frequently—in which we caution someone (likely a child) that they are to do as I say...**not** as I do. I am often put in mind of that expression when pondering one or more of our Lord's "push our button" teachings, because on such occasions I inevitably recall that Jesus the Teacher was first and foremost Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the Christ, Jesus the **Saviour** who not only spoke the truth but courageously chose to **live** the truth: that truth, above all, serving to remind us of God's unwavering love for us, broken and battered and deeply compromised though we be. And Christ did so by demonstrating an uncanny willingness to enter into the fullness...into the fullness both of the joys and the sorrows that are the warp and woof of our humanity. Mark, Matthew and Luke all inform us that Christ—as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane—was sorrowful, even unto death: with Matthew and Luke adding that he was not only sorrowful but troubled. For its part, John's Gospel—which does not depict Christ at Gethsemane—instead depicts the tears that flowed, and the deep sorrow that shook his entire frame, as he stood outside Lazarus' tomb. To speak here of his compassion does not, quite frankly, go far enough. What Gethsemane...and the tears shed at Lazarus' tomb make abundantly clear, is a Christ, a Messiah, a **Saviour**, who has entered into deep solidarity with men and women of every race, every caste, every culture: and not merely in their times of ease, but especially in their times of travail, in their times of crisis and yes: in their times when anxiety and panic shake their very frame.

Which also helps to explain why for us—when we bring our Harvest festivities into this sanctuary, this **Christian** place of worship...

...that helps to explain why it is so right and so fitting that our celebrations reach their true destination at this table. Realizing full well how that which is offered at this table seems embarrassingly meagre in contrast to the full-throated feasts most of us will celebrate at some point this weekend...

...mere crumbs of bread...tiny glasses of juice...

...while these gifts may seem meagre on the surface, they contain a world of memory and a world of hope. Hope for the coming of a day when we will be equipped to lay all of our anxieties to the side. Better still: memory of a love that was prepared to pay any and every price in order to name us, to claim us, and to bring us safely home.

Such is the love that has found us in the name of Jesus Christ! And yes, on this weekend of thanks-offering, such is the love for which you and I have the **privilege** of offering our gratitude, and the **vocation**--as his disciples—to offer our lives.

In Jesus' name. Amen!

ⁱ Joel, 2: 21-27

ⁱⁱ 1st Timothy, 2:1-7