

Thanksgiving Day 2007

Sermon preached by The Rev. Adrien P. Dawson

Gospel

Matthew 6:25-33

Jesus said, "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."

Thanksgiving Prayer: the antidote for worry

A few weeks ago a friend of mine confessed that she really wanted to somehow quit receiving emails from a prayer group that she had joined sometime ago.

"I know this sounds terrible," she said, "but I really don't care about all those people on the list that I don't know who just stubbed their toe or have a hang nail or something silly. I can't really pray for them."

"Well, why do you think people ask to be prayed for?" I asked her.

"The more I think about it, the more I'm not sure. I mean, if it's just a contest to see who can get the most people to pray for them, then count me out."

"So, if the sheer number of people praying for you isn't the point, what do you think the point is?"

By this time a few more people had joined our conversation.

"Yeah, I've always been uneasy about the idea that the more people you have praying for you, the more God will listen. What if you don't have that many friends?"

"That doesn't seem like the God I know." Another person added.

"Yeah, Prayer is not about quantity. I'm not sure I even want the power to persuade God to change God's mind. Why should God listen to me?"

"So," I began, "if the point of prayer is not to change God, perhaps prayer is supposed to change us." Then the conversation got really interesting.

After awhile we had to talk about the different kinds of prayers that we offer up to God. There is a helpful acronym to remember, ACTS: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Most prayer groups have a lot of supplication prayers for all the people who are sick and suffering. We kind of like to share these supplication prayers, we feel like we are really doing something when we pray for someone with disease or disaster, and we might even feel better about our own life in comparison. Prayer groups may also have a healthy sprinkling of

thanksgiving prayers for people who have gotten well, or babies who were born, or weddings, or other life events that we share and celebrate. On the whole, we decided that we are not too good at confession, especially telling another human being about our own person sins. Unless we have hit bottom and the only way out is to face our sins ask for help, even then, we tend to talk to a mental health professional before we tell a prayer group. We agreed that Adoration Prayer is one that eludes us when we try to pray with words, but if we are singing or doing artwork, then Adoration comes more easily.

As I read through today's Gospel lesson, I remembered this conversation about prayer because we finally concluded that the real reason to pray is so that we can be freed up to love and care for one another without being crushed by the corresponding weight of worry and anxiety. Every time we really pray, we are recognizing that we are not in control and we are not asking for God to do our bidding. Rather we are asking God to help us remember that God is in control and working out God's will in every situation. Basically, all prayer is an opportunity for us to pry open our anxious, worrying hands and give it all up to God. This is no easy task.

As Jesus recognizes, we can all be consumed with worry. Each of us may have our own pet set of anxieties, *you know the stuff you fret over*, but we all worry just the same. Worry causes us to loose sleep. Worry keeps us from being able think clearly. Worry makes our wheels spin, our stomach churn, and our chest gets tight. And, as Jesus so clearly admonishes us, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" No, we can't. The truth is, worry and anxiety actually reduce our life-span. All the energy we expend worrying about things outside of our control is energy that our bodies lack to fight of disease and build health.

Sometimes, when our lives are going really well, totally according to plan, maybe even better than we planned, we start thinking that our life is entirely of our own making. We begin to believe our own publicity and suddenly the life that we have become accustomed to living is a constant source of anxiety. If I am responsible for getting to this pinnacle of achievement, then I must work very hard to remain at this high point in my life. When we are self-made super humans we become workaholics, uber-parents, and fitness fanatics. Our talents and abilities turn into obsessions and worry consumes us. Moses admonishes the Israelites that once they reach the Promised Land, they must not think, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today." The talents and abilities that we enjoy in our lives are but gifts from God, given to us that we might do God's will on earth, as it is in heaven. We owe thanks to God for anything that we might be gifted enough to achieve.

Prayers of Thanksgiving are really powerful antidotes for the venom of worry. When we give thanks to God, we get our lives and the lives of those we love and care about out of our own meddling hands and put it into a divine perspective. Melodie Beattie, an author of many 12-step books writes, "Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos into order, confusion into clarity.... It turns problems into gifts, failures into success, the unexpected into perfect timing, and mistakes into important events." When we offer up thanks to God for whatever in our life reveals God's love and presence, then we discover that even in the valley of the shadow of death, God is with us. Today, Thanksgiving Day, we usually remember to give thanks. Some families even have a ritual of sharing with one another on this day something that they are thankful for. How might we be changed if everyday we prayed a mantra of, "Thank you." For every breath we are

blessed to take. "Thank you." For every color we are able to see. "Thank you." For every fragrance we smell. "Thank you." For every taste we enjoy. "Thank you." For every texture we touch. "Thank you." For every sound we hear. "Thank you." For every person we know. "Thank you." *Breathe* "Thank you." *Breathe* "Thank you." *Breathe* "Thank you." *Breathe* "Thank you." *Breathe* "Thank you."