

Sermon Prepared by The Rev. Matt Rhodes for
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Forest, Virginia
Thanksgiving Day, November 25, 2021

(Matthew 6:25-33)

After what we've experienced over the past nearly two years ... a time of separation, and illness, and loss ... a time of instability, division and high emotion ... a time of uncertainty and lack of clear vision about what lay ahead on our journey ... it's quite understandable that *worry* has for many become a constant companion. It has indeed been a period of high anxiety, and because of that this passage from Matthew's Gospel comes at an opportune time on this Thanksgiving morning.

Quite frankly, I think any time is appropriate for these words. Even when things are going incredibly well ... when they are, in the words of the classic song from the Broadway musical *Gypsy* "coming up roses" ... fear, worry and anxiety sometimes have a way of creeping in and starting to dim the bright edges of life. It's in the moments when that slow creep begins that Jesus steps in to remind us to "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."¹

This morning's Gospel reading comes from the end of the lengthy Sermon on the Mount discourse that began in chapter five. Here in these verses Jesus is trying to offer a clear picture of what we should consider the priorities of life ... to avoid the worries of tomorrow by focusing on this moment. He puts it in the context of what – 2,000 years ago and today – are perhaps our three most basic needs: food, water and clothing. Going a step further, he even puts our worries up against the worries of birds and flowers. *If they don't do anything at all and receive God's abundance*, he asks, *will any of you who are even greater than the birds and lilies have any reason to worry?*

I'd like to interject here my thought that it's unfortunate Psalm 104 isn't assigned in today's lectionary readings. I think these verses are especially appropriate, particularly in light of the point that Jesus is trying to make:

*O Lord, how manifold are your works!
in wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
Yonder is the great and wide sea
with its living creatures too many to number,
creatures both small and great.
There move the ships,
and there is that Leviathan,*

¹ Matthew 6:33 (NRSV).

*which you have made for the sport of it.
All of them look to you
to give them their food in due season.
You give it to them; they gather it;
you open your hand, and they are filled with good things.*²

All of them look to you to give them their food ... You give it to them; ... you open your hand, and they are filled with good things. The animals and the lilies in their own way, through the simple fact that they exist, trust in God. Jesus is reminding his listeners that whether by instinct or intuition, these parts of creation don't look to the world for their needs to be met; they look to God. Shouldn't we as even greater parts of creation not do the same?

This is important for us to remember, an anchor to keep us steady in the midst of the choppy seas of life. As N.T. Wright states, "Put the world first, and you'll find it gets moth-eaten in your hands. Put God first, and you'll get the world thrown in."³ He continues that we should be striving for the covenant way of life that marks us as God's own. "These are the things you should aim at," he says. "Then you'll find that food, drink and clothing look after themselves."⁴

At the very core of his message, Jesus tells us that we should live in *faith* that our basic needs will be met. The understanding of needs in the modern world has to a great extent changed a great deal from the understanding of needs in the world two millennia ago. Despite that, we should always trust in God's power for our genuine needs.⁵ We should always strive to live in faith ... faith that *all these things will be given unto you*.

Yes, God provides ... but as I'm often quick to point out it's not necessarily in the way we expect but rather in the surprising moments we and others least expect. I've talked several times in the past about how God gives ... how God *acts* ... through the work of his children here on earth. Over the past week I've watched as we were able to give from our abundance to support our neighbors in need. The responses shared with those delivering the Thanksgiving meals to these families were powerful and emotional ... and on some level and indication of the faith that God would provide. They may not have known how, but they *knew*.

I'm reminded of the words of Deuteronomy:

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not

² Psalm 104:25-29 (NRSV).

³ N. T. Wright. *Matthew for Everyone, Part One: Chapters 1-15*, p. 66.

⁴ Wright, p. 67.

⁵ Craig S. Keener. *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 234.

*be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be... Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."*⁶

Did you hear it – the interplay between the psalmist and the writer of Deuteronomy? *Open your hand*. When anxiety and uncertainty are dwelling with you, open your hand to receive from God. When there is anxiety and uncertainty dwelling with your neighbor, open your hand to allow God to give through you. As Craig Keener writes, "Seeking God's kingdom means valuing what God values and obeying his commands: it is when his people care for others in need among them that God supplies the needs of his people as a whole, perhaps because then he can best trust them to use his gifts righteously."⁷

On this Thanksgiving Day I pray we're each able to give thanks to God for the meeting of our basic needs. I pray we're each able to give thanks for the work God does through us for others. I pray above all that when we each open our hands to God, they are filled with good things indeed.

Amen.

⁶ From Deuteronomy 15 (NRSV).

⁷ Keener, p. 237.