

Sermon 11.22.15

Matthew 6:24-34

Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'

Thanksgiving Day is upon us. It's my favorite holiday of the year, as it is the most unifying holiday in my extended family. I have family members who are professed and/or practicing Christians, (of a variety of denominational flavors), Ba'hai's, Jews, agnostics and atheists. Thus, while other religious festivals, like Christmas and Easter, may not draw us together, we can all gather around the table at this time of year to celebrate and give thanks for all the blessings in our lives. It is a joy to listen to one another's gratitude list at beginning of our meal beginning with the youngest person. Each person is asked to share something meaningful for which they are grateful. It is a spiritual and sacred moment for which I am most appreciative.

But, the days and months leading up to our Thanksgiving Day celebrations have always been tiresome and worrisome. My mother was, when she was alive, the prize-winning planner and worrier in the family. She has now successfully passed that role off to my sister, Beth. Months before our gathering, my mother would start calling me to talk about the menu for the day. She would collect recipes, copy them and snail mail them to both of her daughters. For some reason my brother got left out of this family tradition, though he is an excellent cook. Then, the phone calls would start. She'd ring us up and wring us out with her angst over the food preparations and who was doing which recipe and would they make enough to accommodate this year's crowd and could we please keep it affordable by making substitutions that would not compromise the recipe. Then there were the calls about table preparations. And finally, there were the worries about who was arriving when; who else they were bringing with them this year; where was everyone sleeping; how many dogs were coming and would they get along; and finally when was everyone leaving (an essential piece of information so you knew how many other meals would have to be planned and prepared.) By the time Thanksgiving usually rolled around, I was exhausted from all the fretting. There was always enough food to feed anyone who showed up and it is always delicious. We almost always have leftovers, except of mash potatoes, some how we never make enough mash potatoes, and everything is delicious. So, why all the worry? By the time we sit down to dinner, my sister and I are usually wrung out from it all. Yet, somehow the Spirit intervenes, we are able to set aside the angst of it all, and just enjoy the wonder of the moment; a sacramental moment when family and friends gather to break bread together and give thanks.

Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'

It's easy for me now to reflect on my mother's obsessive, worrisome behavior; to see how crazy making it all was; how unfounded and unnecessary her worries were as every Thanksgiving always worked out. There was and continues to be always enough, more than enough—enough food, enough places for everyone to sit at table, adequate sleeping arrangements, everyone gets along, including the dogs. No one has ever come away from our Thanksgiving celebration hungry in body or in spirit.

Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'

It's easy for me to see how futile 'worry' can be. Yet, what about when 'worry' is not just compulsive and obsessive; when there is potential real threat to human life?

It's easy to say to someone, "Don't worry!" "It'll all be ok." But, we know how futile and irritating it is for someone to dismiss our angst, not knowing the real threat that you may be facing. As one colleague put it, "There is nothing more irksome than someone telling you *not* to worry. It does nothing to assuage your anxiety. If anything, it inflames it, because now you know that this person is clueless about (1) you, and (2) the very real and present danger at hand. Now you have to worry for *both* of you, because clearly this person will be of no help at all, when the boom falls, which of course it will." (Anna Carter Florence)

When there is potential real threat to our life or ones we love, then we may think worrying is justified, even deemed necessary. When you don't know when you will eat next or if there will be enough food or drink to feed your family, you worry. When you fight with yourself over the choice between paying the electric bill or putting food on the table, you worry. When you send your kid off to school, you worry whether they will be safe there. When your teenager goes out at night, you worry whether they'll come home. We worry over all kinds of things that potentially affect our health, safety and welfare. We worry whether we will be able to not just thrive, but survive. We worry whether we can find ways to overcome all that divides us as people, as citizens, as members of the human family. Such is the case for many of us in our own communities, country and around the world. Such was the case too in Jesus' time. So at first blush his words may seem harsh, uncaring about their plight telling them:

Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²

In this New Testament reading where Jesus posed this question about adding to our span through worry, he went on to make clear that what he was calling for instead was for them, for us, to trust God. He pointed to the birds that do not sow or reap the fields but are fed by the God nonetheless. He pointed to the flowers that do not toil or spin, but are clothed in beauty by God anyway.

It's critical to understand, however, that his words were directed to people who *did* have to sow, to reap, to toil and to spin, and he wasn't telling them to stop doing those tasks;

he simply wanted them to understand that their lives were a lot more than the sum of their sowing, reaping, toiling, spinning. Their lives mean more to God than all the striving just to survive. Jesus wanted them, wants us, to know how much we mean to God, how loved, beloved we are in God's eyes.

Further, we must take note that Jesus tied the call to not worry to the kingdom of God: "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." That's a significant linkage because God's kingdom is the ultimate reason for optimism and hope. The very meaning of the kingdom is that *God and those who stand with God win*. In the end, good triumphs over evil. If you're a citizen of God's kingdom — and all of us are--it's still possible that you might be pessimistic about human activity in the short term, but you've got every reason to be optimistic about God's activity in the long term. We may feel at times lost, alone and abandoned. But, we are not. We are God's own. God will find a way. Jesus encourages us to trust in God and let God be concerned with how **together** we may usher in the realm of God, in which all are beloved and have what they need to not just survive, but thrive. If we trust in God, God will show us how together all are invited to come feast at God's table and **together** give thanks.

This week my friend, Amy, sent me this story. It's a moving thanksgiving moment in her friend, Naomi's life. I invite you to listen to Naomi's words. "After learning my flight was detained 4 hours, I heard the announcement: If anyone in the vicinity of gate 4-A understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.

Well—one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate. I went there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly.

Help, said the flight service person. Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be four hours late and she did this.

I put my arm around her and spoke to her haltingly

Shu dow-a, shu- biduck habibti, stani stani schway, min fadlick, sho bit se-wee?

The minute she heard any words she knew—however poorly used—she stopped crying.

She thought our flight had been canceled entirely.

She needed to be in El Paso for some major medical treatment the

following day. I said no, no, we're fine, you'll get there, just late,

Who is picking you up? Let's call him and tell him.

We called her son and I spoke with him in English.

I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would ride next to her—Southwest.

She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it.

Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends.

Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian

poets I know and let them chat with her. This all took up about 2 hours.

She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life. Answering

Questions.

She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies—little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts—out of her bag—and was offering them to all the women at the gate.

To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the traveler from California, the lovely woman from Laredo—we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There are no better cookies. And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers—non-alcoholic—and the two little girls for our flight, one African American, one Mexican American—ran around serving us all apple juice and lemonade and they were covered with powdered sugar too.

And I noticed my new best friend—by now we were holding hands—had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, With green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere. And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world.

Not a single person in this gate—once the crying of confusion stopped—has seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.”--Naomi Shihab Nye

In light of all the worries in our world, we are invited by Jesus not to let our worries define us and determine us. Jesus still points us to a different horizon, toward God’s realm. It’s a realm in which love, grace, generosity, healing and hope prevail. It’s a realm we can glimpse here and now, when we open our hearts and our lives to one another. It’s a realm in which people from varying cultures and traditions can come together share some date nut cookies, apple juice, and lemonade, share stories, laugh, and *together* give thanks, for they know they have joined in a sacramental feast at God’s table. May all of us feast at God’s table this Thanksgiving and in those surprising sacramental moments that happen when we trust God and share God’s love and grace abundantly with all whom we meet and greet. Amen