

You don't need to be a Psychic, or a rocket scientist, to know that tomorrow a majority of us will be eating turkey, stuffing, mash potatoes, cranberry sauce, green bean casserole, and for dessert maybe a little pumpkin pie. Perhaps we'll watch the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade and afterwards the dog show that follows. Maybe we will gather with our friends and family to share a meal together as we laugh and catch up on all the exciting events that have been happening in our lives. Perhaps we will even sit down to watch a Football game, while the tryptophan kicks in and naptime rolls around. And, more likely than not, some of us, in fact, may even take part in the popular tradition of going around the table while everyone shares at least one thing they are thankful for.

While we were growing up, most of us were taught that the first celebration of thanksgiving dates back to 1621, when the newly arrived Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Indians gathered at Plymouth to share an autumn harvest. And, if you believe Wikipedia, for the next fifty years or so after that, Thanksgiving was declared by local clergy, and then eventually by public officials, until, in 1789, George Washington officially declared, by order of both Houses of Congress, "Thanksgiving to be a day of public thanksgiving and prayer." So, it is a Holiday that has been part of who we are for at least a few hundred years for those of us living in the United States.

But as Christians, thanksgiving is not only a date on the calendar, but it's a way of being that is woven into us through Scripture and in our service to others. The Psalmist calls us to "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever." Gratitude, for us, is a way of life, living in such a way, as Paul writes to Timothy, so that "prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone." Later in chapter 6 he declares that we should do this so that we may "take hold of the life that really is life."

Take hold of the life that really is life. This is what Jesus is calling us to do in our Gospel lesson this evening as well. He says, "Do not worry, [asking], '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.”

Strive first for the kingdom of God! This is how we take hold of the life that really is life. When Jesus says not to worry, he is not saying that we should be footloose and fancy-free. He is saying, set your priorities right. Strive first for the kingdom of God. Why worry about things like what to wear or what to eat? Instead, focus on seeking God’s kingdom first—a kingdom of loving God and loving our neighbors, a kingdom full of righteousness and gratitude.

It’s a good reminder for us as we celebrate thanksgiving—this ordering of our priorities. Too often, we run around like the well-known Bible character Martha, prepping and planning and organizing, when like Mary, we would do better to seek Jesus’ presence first. Too often, we focus on the food—what we will eat...what we will drink—instead of the company. Too often, we spend our lives worrying and fretting, instead of striving—in action—for what is important.

Just over 10 years ago, an Australian author and motivational speaker named Bronnie Ware wrote a blogpost which was a reflection on her care of patients who were terminally ill—like those who are in Hospice or on comfort care in a hospital. Ware’s online article must have hit a nerve, because in only a short time, over a million people viewed her post; and back in 2011, she published a book by the same title: *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying*. You may have read it, or the original blogpost, but here are the five regrets that cropped up again and again among her care-receivers: 1. I wish I’d had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me. 2. I wish I didn’t work so hard. 3. I wish I’d had the courage to express my feelings. 4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends. 5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.

At the end of life, people wish, in many ways, that they had not worried so much about the wrong things. At the end of their lives, people realize with greater clarity how much time we waste on things that simply should not be a priority. This evening you might

say that Jesus is trying to help his listeners—and *us*—to understand this prioritizing now as we live, not just when we reach the end of our lives.

Today our passage from Matthew’s Gospel is taken from what we refer to as the sermon on the Mount—preached by Jesus to the crowds alongside the Sea of Galilee. While we might think Jesus mysterious with his parables and teachings, he actually is quite practical. He rarely preaches on difficult, complex theological theory. He uses stories about things people actually experience—stories about farming, daily life, gardening, fishing.

As he is preaching to the crowd on the hillside –notice he is preaching up to them, not talking down to them –it isn’t all that surprising that as he is telling them not to worry so much he points them in the direction of the wildflowers that were most likely growing on that hillside: consider those lilies—they neither toil nor spin, yet even the wealthy King Solomon in his most glorious robe was not dressed as beautifully as these flowers.

All your worrying about these superficial things—eating, drinking, clothing—is ridiculous. “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” Instead of worrying, wringing our hands, lying in bed awake while the whatifs of life overtake us, Jesus calls us to strive—to seek—to live out the kingdom of God. That involves some action. That involves living into our faith in such a way that we are grateful bearers of hope, not hand-wringing worriers, or people holed up inside our own safe walls or fortresses of solitude.

Jesus doesn’t directly address, in this passage, the benefits of striving for the kingdom of God. But we know at least some of them. What’s the benefit of tying a quilt for Lutheran World relief or volunteering to serve a meal at Friendship House? What’s the benefit of going on a mission trip? What’s the benefit of being a good steward of our finances? What’s the benefit of sitting with, and comforting, a brother or sister in Christ who is grieving?

By seeking God’s kingdom—to love God and to serve others in Jesus’ name—we melt off some of that worry that isn’t adding a single hour to our lifespan in any way, shape, or form. Think about it, when was the last time you worried about what your hair looked like while you were ringing bells for the Salvation Army? When have you wished for a

bigger house while you were hammering away on a Habitat house? When have you felt like you needed some better clothes after donating money to refugees? When have you prayed for a nicer car while attending a Bible study? By striving for God's kingdom, by loving God and loving others, we reprioritize our needs. And not only do we reprioritize; we actually appreciate what we already have that much more, which is really the best part of thanksgiving.

I recently heard a parable about a goat—a goat joke, so to speak. A man goes to complain to his local priest that his living conditions are unbearable—nine family members living in one room. The priest directs the man to bring his goat inside to live with the family for one week. Seven days go by, and the priest asks the man how it's going. The man scowls: "Oh, it's terrible—the stink! And now it's so much more crowded. We can't stand it." So the priest directs the man to let the goat live back outside for the next week. Seven days go by, and the priest checks in again the man. He smiles widely: "Oh, it's wonderful. Life is SO much better with the goat back outside—only the nine of us and no goat."

Perspective is everything, right? Well, the world is certainly giving us perspective. It might be somewhat cozy and fairly relaxing to be gathered here for worship tonight. But five minutes outside our walls will open our eyes pretty quickly. We can't walk through Mount Vernon, or downtown Burlington, without knowing there are people whose lives are difficult, who have found false comfort and security in drugs, even with a chance of overdose and death, or people who have no permanent place to lay their heads at night—a sad reality that seems to only be getting worse, especially during the pandemic.

Look a little further, and the racism prevalent in our country turns out to be as big, if not a bigger problem, of disparity right in our own backyard. Look a little wider, and you might witness increasing acts of injustice and lawlessness unfolding around us. Look a little further and there's fear and people fleeing the real threat of death, not just an imagined terror. As poet Warsan Shire reflects in his poem entitled *Home*: "no one leaves home unless/ home is the mouth of a shark/you only run for the border when you see the whole

city running as well... you have to understand, that no one puts their children in a boat/unless the water is safer than the land.”

In the midst of all of this, Jesus is calling: “strive first for the kingdom of God.” In the midst of all of this, it makes worrying about our own lives seem awfully trivial. In the midst of all of this, working ourselves to death for what we will eat or drink or wear, well, it just won’t cut it at followers of Jesus. Instead, in the midst of all of this, with good works and generosity, we are called to strive first for the kingdom of God.

So...let us stop worrying and let us start moving to action—excellent advice from over 2000 years ago. And as we seek to create God’s kingdom here on earth, these are good words for us to live out during these dark times. After all, when we have God’s kingdom as our priority, we pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. We trust God. We become rich in good works, selfless, generous, and ready to share. We take hold of the life that really is life, as Paul writes. We become thanksgiving people—by not only giving God our thanks, but by living out our thanks through service and love. May this thanksgiving be a reminder, not only of how we are blessed, but also how we can be a blessing to others, striving for God’s kingdom of love and righteousness. Thanks be to God! Amen.