

Sermon for November 22, 2006  
Thanksgiving Eve

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### Don't Be Anxious, Be Thankful!

It is simply great that we as congregations can gather again at worship to offer our shared thanks to God. Giving thanks is really at the heart of why Christians worship.

This Thanksgiving Eve service is a festival of the harvest, a thanksgiving to God for sustaining us and all living things. Our lessons throughout the year rarely focus on the first person of the Trinity, God the creator of all that exists and the sustainer of all of life. Tonight and tomorrow we are thankful to our Creator upon whom our lives and those of all living things depend.

Jesus reminds us tonight from the gospel of Matthew that our thanksgivings do not always come easy. "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the sparrows of the air." If I were to give this sermon a title it would be, "Don't Be Anxious, Be Thankful".

Jesus says the word "anxious" four times in tonight's gospel. I wanted to make sure that the way he was using the word and the way we commonly use it are the same. They are. Webster defines anxiety as "a state being uneasy, apprehensive or worrying about what may happen."

The first two anxious people in the Bible are Adam and Eve. They are uneasy about being mere mortals who do not know enough, not knowing everything like God. When we do not know what the future will bring we are reduced to faith, trusting the future to God. The lessons from last Sunday speak to the end times. Jesus says that there may be a few bumps along the way to the consummation of God's creation, things like earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Jesus says that these are but birth pangs of the marvelous thing that God is doing. Don't be consumed by anxiety because the future belongs to God.

As a sign of our times, look at how anxious Christians have come to interpret lessons about the future. They have chosen to interpret them literally predicting exactly what will happen and when and who will be saved, don't get left behind. They have invented human certainties to deny that age old human preoccupation with inappropriate anxiety. If, on the other hand, we can trust the future to God, living from the Spirit's gift of faith, instead of human certainty, we can be free to be genuinely thankful.

It is important to remember that being anxious may be a good thing. When I was on the summer staff of Holden Village a group of us went on a three-day hike. On the last day our leader Dean told us that he had always wanted to climb Buckskin Mountain but had failed on all previous attempts. We trusted Dean, but that day his urge to finally climb that peak from the back side got the best of his good judgments. Most of us followed. Our first clue that it was a bad idea should have been that we were not roped together. Getting very close to the top I just quit. My anxiety

that was there from the start got the best of me and I just sat on a ledge and announced that I would wait for their return. A few moments later after the others disappeared around a corner I heard a loud crashing. Dean had reached around a corner to find a hand hold and had set a bolder a cascading down old Buckskin. Dean was finally anxious about the future and decided it was time to turn back.

There are times when we do not know what is just around the corner and too many signs point to irreversible dangers. In those times anxiety is a very handy gift to bring us to our senses. There are times when we must make decisions together that will significantly affect the future. These days scientists around the world have reached consensus about Climate Change or Global Warming and agree that it is caused by us human beings who have refused to change our energy consuming ways. Because the future appears to be very dangerous we must change our ways. Shared anxiety about the future can be a good thing.

But there is inappropriate anxiety that abounds these days. Instead of worrying about the future of the earth as stewards of God's creation we fall into the trap of worrying more about the price of gasoline. Shortly after 9/11 the message to us as a people who were searching for what to do and how to respond was to go the shopping malls.

The word of God is clear to us in times of disaster. In the book of Joel, right after almost all the crops were destroyed by locusts the prophet spoke hopefully. Joel spoke first to the soil from which all life comes including humanity. "Do not fear, oh soil for God has done great things." He turned to the animals and said, "Do not fear for God will do great things in and through you." Despite all the destruction God's salvation will come not only to people but also to the land and all its creatures. And then the prophet turned to the people and said, "O children of Zion, rejoice, for the abundance of rain and harvest will be yours again". There will be food aplenty.

In power and love God has the capacity to both destroy life and create it in abundance. How do we thinking creatures respond to such uncertainty? Jesus points us to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field for instruction. They are naturally content to live within their limits as creatures, the creaturely boundaries set by their Creator. In the same way Jesus points us to what is really important for us as human beings, "strive first for the Reign of God, and its righteousness and all these things will be yours." We already have enough. In trusting and striving for God's kingdom, God gives us grace to know that everything else is extra.

But the problem is that we become anxious about the future. To make us feel more secure we demand life on our own terms instead of having to receive it daily from God. "Give us this day our daily bread."

We are very special, we human beings, but we are also finite creatures. Instead of rejoicing in being creatures who trust our lives to the Lord and giver of life, we build bigger and bigger barns and consumption of more or earth's resources to secure our future making the condition of our anxiety even worse. Our hoarding only leads to fear, hatred and even war.

Instead of living with and for the rest of creation we human beings live with delusions of grandeur and the whole creation suffers from our arrogance and greed.

There is a very simple solution. The birds and lilies naturally live within their limits. They are not preoccupied, anxious about what they do not have. Their songs of joy and display of beauty speak to their contentment which gives praise to their creator through their very beings.

Perhaps we can do the same? Coveting, which the commandment says we should not do, is being preoccupied with what we do not have. Keeping this commandment is dwelling on what we already have. Can you imagine just setting a day aside to practice such contentment? Can you imagine a day in which we are just so consumed with what God has already given us that we are filled with thanksgiving? The Bible refers to such a day as the Sabbath. But we are also given the gift of having such a day in the form of a national holiday.

Wouldn't our embracing such a day increase our vocabulary to include such words as "enough"? God has given us enough for life. Perhaps such reflection would instruct us on the differences between necessities and extras? And because tomorrow is a national holiday, maybe observing such a day would teach us to be content? Maybe we could then understand that these gifts are meant to be shared with all the people of the world, not to be hoarded in our own bigger and better barns? And maybe we could then live as citizens of this world and not just of this nation? Nations are, after all, human creations. God creates all people.

May tomorrow, truly be a day of thanksgiving that flows from dwelling on and being thankful for what God has already given us. May we gather in the warmth of our homes thankful for shelter. May the joy of family and loved ones fill our day. May laughter fill our lives. May the silence fill the air anticipating the first oohs and ahhs as we savor the first taste of turkey and dressing. May we not be anxious because the turkey is too dry. "Please pass the gravy".

For the sparrow there is no greater joy to be found in the universe than being a sparrow, and I don't mean just being a sparrow. Behold its creator! Through the wisdom of our Creator there is the promise that we will discover more joy through being human than can fill a lifetime! May our lives through what we both say and do reflect the goodness of our creator. A blessed Thanksgiving to you all! Amen!