

Thanksgiving Sunday – 11 October 2009
 1100hrs – Thanksgiving and Generosity
 Preacher Jim Short

Matthew 6:24-34

²⁴“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

²⁵“Therefore 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? ²⁶Look 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? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But 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? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

+++++

The celebration of “thanksgiving” in its many forms and in many faith and cultural traditions originated in the rhythm of early hunter and gatherer societies...

You and your family would spend the spring, summer and early fall – hunting and gathering food and storing it up for the long winter months....

if all worked together in the cycle of life – you came safely to the fall – before the winter – cold and snow came – with enough food laid up to bring you and your family to the next Spring...you were grateful and you stopped to say thanks

Nothing was quarantined in those early societies...just as we know that there are no guarantees in life beyond this present breath...

Climate change

A forest fire

A drought

Unusually cold or hot weather

An attack from another group of people

And you might come to the winter – cold with the cupboard empty...the future would be starvation and death – unless perhaps your more prosperous neighbors helped out...

So hence it was a time of thanksgiving...we've made it through another year and in terms of food – we will see the spring come...

+++++

Our scripture lesson for today – Matthew 25-34 is one part of a larger section in Matthew called The Sermon on the Mount...

It is the words of Jesus – the traveling preacher – delivered on the hillsides and beside the lakes of his own Galilee

Likely Matthew – writing some years later – has collected a series of Jesus' sayings and teachings into this one episode...

Know – when we read all of the Sermon on the Mount – the common to how Jesus is asking his disciples to live

Is fear – to consider them hard teachings, unattainable...and to admire them from a distance as great teachings but not practical or attainable... (What follows is from the Center for Christian Ethics – Baylor University)

(List from David Ewart's Website – Holy Textures)

- The Beatitudes
- Being salt of the earth and light of the world
- Obeying and fulfilling the law
- Anger and reconciliation
- Adultery in our hearts
- Divorce
- Let your Yes be Yes or your No be No
- Do not retaliate, instead publicly expose the unjust authority
- Love your enemies
- Give alms, but don't make a show of it
- Pray, but don't make a show of it
- Fast, but don't make a show of it

- Store up treasures in heaven not on earth
- Make sure your inner light is healthy
- Don't think you can serve two masters: God and wealth

Yet Matthew is clear that for his readers – these teachings of Jesus were heard and celebrated as good news...

What makes them good news and not bad news...

What determines that is what direction you come at them from...

According to some reading I did this week – there are (Charles Talbert) two directions to approach these texts from:

The first is legalism. (For many people this is their definition of faith and religion)

Approaching the Sermon on the Mount from a legalistic perspective means that we see it as a list of rules that we must keep which stand between us and the love and grace of God.

I am not worthy for God to love me – until I can keep all these rules – if I don't or can't keep them – then I am outside the realm of God's love...and I have to continue daily to keep them to keep God's love for me in place...

The emphasis is upon me – I have to do this, I have to achieve this and only when I have...will I then attain God's love...

The second direction is that of Grace.

If I approach the Sermon on the Mount from a perspective of Grace...

From that direction – I know that even before I hear the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount that God loves me...that act of God's love was solidified for me and the entire world in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I am in a relationship with God by faith – and as part of that relationship God gives me guidance upon how I am to live and work with others...God's love is free and unconditional

The Sermon on the Mount

It is not a series of hurdles for me to climb over – rather it is an image of God's world that God will turn my heart to -

...and God empowers me ...through the Spirit of God to follow it faithfully...

You can see they are very different directions...

I have to live all the teachings of the sermon on the mount before God will even dare to love me...I have to climb to the top of the mountain alone to get to God...its an endless and hopeless task...

Before I even begin climbing – by faith accepting God’s love – God and the Church walk with me to the top of the mountain – God’s way for humans to live.

Over the last two weeks I spoke of the importance of prayer and of setting our intentionality to live as God calls us to...

God asks only for me to be open, to trust – to set God way of life as my intention and then God through the Holy Spirit...

See time and time again in the New Testament especially

How the term God’s indwelling

Abiding

transforming love are used to describe this process...Ancient people believed that the more you placed yourself before God intentionally in prayer and worship – that in the process God transformed life’s and hearts to see in a new way and live a new life...

John Wesley – the founder of the Methodist Church used the term – justification and sanctification

Justification is the moment in time when I first say Yes to God’s love

Sanctification is the life long process of growing holy...of being transformed by the free and unconditional forgiving Grace of God...

So here’s the promise of Matthew...

Put aside your anxiety and your fear about the future – about all kinds of things and set your heart upon God and God’s Kingdom

And all these things will be added unto you...

Know – let’s be clear – the passage is not saying that we should all give up our jobs, our lives, our plans and run off to the Dead Sea and take up the surfing lifestyle and depend upon other people to feed us...

+++++

Today...

What is upon your heart?

How do you feel about life?

Thanksgiving, bitterness, gratitude, anger, fear, anxiety

How much do you have?

How much do you have to be thankful?

Despite burdens and hurts we all have – struggles, difficulties –

Think about how much each of us has to be thankful for...

In this world

If you have shelter

Food

Medical care

Clothing

Security

Access to a job or some means of financial support

Access to education...

That's pretty good...

Yet...

We have so much anxiety and fear about life?

How much do you fear for the future and whether you will have enough?

It is hard to believe when we stop to think about it that we live with a cultural mindset in whatever you call it - West or the One Third World – or the countries of the G8 or the G 20 as we sometime refer to...

Where we regularly believe we do not have enough!

And we aim for having more – hoping that it will relieve the fear and anxiety we experience in life...

Where the more people have – the unhappier they say they are and the lonelier they feel...

And on the ladder you are climbing – ask yourself – look about your life – spend time, money and ability...

Are you experiencing peace, satisfaction and the sense that life is really worth living...do you feel fully alive, content, as if you are living with God and living in God's way

I like to watch the show Till Debt do us part – a financial planner named Gail comes into the lives of a couple or a family who are living beyond the amount of money they make monthly and are in the process of driving them into debt...

Most times the show is pretty good – I watched an episode the other night...and I thought what strange values we have...

Here's a couple with a comfortable home – with a dining room suite and an adequate television

Part of their learning challenge was to invite their friends in for a night and they each had to convince them from their own perspective (while in debt) if they should spend money on a new dining room suite or a large screen television

Absurd – injected a third option – to give the money away to a charity – because I've noticed in that show – that that giving away does not often feature into the equation

That the end goal is to take the people out of consumer debt – and place them in a situation where they can have what they want and save up to have huge amounts of money in retirement...

Here's the challenge...

I read this lovely quote

John Haughley – Consumerism

"We (Christians) read the gospel as if we had no money and we spend our money as if we had never read the gospel"

What your legacy is evaluated by others – what do you want it to say?

When you stop - get off the treadmill of having the life you think you want vs. what you need...

What is God saying to you?

When Cathy and I decided that God was calling me to take my leave from our family and my employment here to go to Afghanistan with all its risks and excitement – I can't tell you how many people said to me – I really wish I could find the courage to follow what I believe God wants me to do?

When I asked what – amazing things – some involved changes of job or location – others were changes of time and priority?

What stops you – fear, anxiety, lack of trust, risk?

+++++

What do you wish to give the very best of yourself to?

Barrack Obama's having won the Nobel Peace Prize brings this story to mind that some of you may have heard...

Alfred Nobel – after having invented dynamite and smokeless gunpowder – which made killing other human beings on the battle field much more efficient

Had a life changing moment when a newspaper mistakenly ran his pre-prepared obituary

And he realized that he would be remembered only for that one fact...that experience so changed both his heart and the direction of his life – became great philanthropist and created the Nobel prizes...

What is the Good News on this thanksgiving?

It is that God loves us and that God mission in having us follow Jesus is to ignite the passion of generosity towards others in our hearts!

I believe we are wired as humans beings for practicing radical generosity to other people – but we need to be shaken up and transformed....

Yesterday I was in theThrift Store which along with the Coffee shop is one of those great laboratories of human nature

And I heard this noise which I realized to be a box being pushed across the floor by someone's foot

And older person with their arms full of purchases...the store was filled with people and I watched to see how long it might take someone to help...

The strong majority of people kept focused on what they were doing – a few looked up...

And I tell that not to be critical but I tell it as a kind of parabolic story of how human culture...

Has shaped our souls and spirits...to look out primarily at our selves and our needs...

But God shaped us to be people who are generous to others...

...

Might not be a great image – each like a can of gas – but fear keeps the cap on – take it off and let God provide the spark...

Here's a clue – thankful people are generous people...

You cannot practice generosity unless you first practice thanksgiving...because thanksgiving quenches fear and anxiety and produces a generous spirit

When you begin in prayer each day to identify before God what you are thankful for beginning with God's love for you in Jesus Christ– an amazing thing will happen to your heart...that no self help book will ever help you achieve

When you begin to thank God

You will discover that you are truly blessed

And when you discover how blessed you are

Your anxiety and fear for yourself will dissipate

And you will discover how much you have...

And in discovering how much you have...

You will learn the difference between need and want

And learning the difference between need and want

You will discover how much of

Time

Talent

Treasure

You can give away to others...

And you will still have more than you ever believed you had

I had a talk with Carmen Leagh, one of our church members who knows something about the joy of giving... – know Carmen

When Carmen was able to get about – go into her garage – her and her husband's Art Studio – laid out on these long tables would be piles and piles

Of deodorant

Toothpaste and brushes

Socks, underwear and towels...

(Not castoffs) but those she was constantly buying on sale for the people served by First United Church

She would tell you about it – not to brag or puff herself up but to express her joy and happiness from the practice of giving and also as a way to encourage the people she spoke of to do the same...

From the practice of generosity

She's now 92 – spends the odd bit of time in the hospital – not quite as steady

I was there a few weeks ago...

She's got a garden – she can't look after it – but she's found someone who can

And why

Well because for 15 years – flowers from her garden have gone to the various wards at the Delta Hospital...countless people have commented on them as well as looked forward to receiving them...a small sign of God's grace in the midst of pain and suffering...

Carmen's flowers...and again when she talks about it – not to aggrandize herself – you can see and feel the life that practicing both thanksgiving and generosity brings....

May God grant you this Thanksgiving – the gift of thanks giving and also from that realization the joy of giving.

