

DO NOT WORRY

MATTHEW 6: 25-33

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In Henri Troyat's biography of Tolstoy, he recounts an incident in the life of the great Russian author. After an embarrassing moment at a grand ball, "Tolstoy walked alone through the streets with clenched fists and feverish brow. The cool, star-studded night made him forget human pettiness. He raised his eyes and let himself be swept away in mystical ecstasy. Beauty always prompted him to question himself and God. 'A marvelous night,' he wrote in his diary. 'What is it I so ardently desire? I do not know. At any rate, it is not the blessings of this world. How can one fail to believe in the immortality of the soul, feeling such incommensurable grandeur in one's own? . . . It is dark, holes in the sky, light. I could die! My God! My God! What am I? Where am I going? Where am I?'"

We get so caught up in our daily lives that like Tolstoy we have to be summoned by some incident, even a humiliating one, to examine our lives. What is my life about? What meaning does it have? In fact, doesn't it sometimes seem to you that modern life is designed to keep us from asking questions of meaning?

Do you remember Emily in Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" ruminating on how we get caught up in one consuming passion after another and thereby losing the meaning of any given moment?

It's so easy to fill up our calendars, to have every moment busy, to be running here and yon, going to this meeting and that party, reading this book and seeing that movie that we can live for years without being confronted about whether we are doing what is best or beneficial or right. So, when Jesus declares in these familiar words from the Sermon on the Mount:

"...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 life not more than food, and the body more than clothing?"

we are confronted with words that call into question our very way of life, what it means to be an American infused with a Puritan work ethic. The compilers of the ecumenical lectionary deliberately selected this Gospel lesson for the celebration of our national holiday of Thanksgiving to compel us to examine our gratitude.

Our Lord goes on: "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?...Do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat? Or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'...God knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Difficult words. Hard choices confront us. Words that we are tempted to ignore or dismiss as irrelevant to our twenty-first century way of life. But, friends, the truth is that God's Word does not have to be

confirmed by our opinions. The Bible is clear: killing is always wrong, even if it's done by the state in the name of capital punishment and even if 63% of the members of mainline Christian denominations in the United States believe it is justified and acceptable. War is evil, even if we name it Osama bin Laden or Kahlid Sheik Maliki. Discrimination against other person, whether in the name of race, ethnic origin, class or sexual orientation, is antithetical to the Bible.

The *New Yorker* carried a cartoon several years ago that showed Moses back on Mount Sinai reporting to God about how the Israelites had reacted to the Ten Commandments. The patriarch tells God that 73% are in favor of one through five, that 41% think number six is unfair, and that 13% are opposed to number seven.

Jesus reminds us that the road to hell is broad and meandering, easy to follow, like a four-lane highway, clearly marked. But the road that leads to eternal life is narrow and demanding and not easy. It is not easy to trust in God's providence, in God's gracious direction, but that's exactly what Our Lord is declaring when He tells us not to worry.

Do you remember that scene from the movie *Schindler's List* in which the Nazi commandant Amon Goeth has fallen in love with Helen Hirsch, his Jewish maid? One night he goes down to the cellar where she lives—ostensibly to thank her for her hard work—but before long he is circling her while she stands speechless, dressed in nothing but her white slip. “I understand that, strictly speaking, you are not a human being,” he says to her. “You are a Jewish vermin, I know, but I ask you,” he says, reaching out to touch her face and then yanking his hand back as if he has been stung, “are those the eyes of a rodent? Are those the lips of a rodent? Is that the hair of a rodent?”

In his own way, the commandant is struggling with the conflict between head and heart, between what he has been carefully taught about Jews and what he has discovered in a relationship of love. She is the enemy, one of “those people” as we so easily characterize those with whom we disagree or those we fear. And yet he loves her. And yet he cannot love her, not without contaminating himself, so he beats her instead, wrecks the cellar and her face at the same time. Who is the rodent here? And how do we transcend what the state so carefully teaches us?

Thomas Carlyle went back to his hometown in Scotland and went to church with his mother. He was exasperated, frustrated by the platitudes and aphorisms and evasions he heard from the Presbyterian pastor. At lunch that day, he declared, “If I were a preacher, I would mount the pulpit and say to the people, ‘You know what is right. Go and do it.’” Carlyle's mother quietly answered, “Aye, Tammas, and would you tell them how?”

God's will is clear in many aspects of our lives but some parts are filled with uncertainty. Perhaps the way to find God's will is by hearing St. Paul's list-making to the Galatians: “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit...Now the works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the

fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law" (Galatians v16-24).

That wonderful Southern preacher, that uncompromising radical who preached against racism and classism, who founded Koinonia Farms out of which grew Habitat for Humanity, Clarence Jordan, was once confronted by a Southern lady who had listened to his sermon with outrage. She counterattacked, "I want you to know that my grandfather fought in the Civil War, and I'll never believe a word you say." Clarence whose own forebears had also fought the Yankees, gently replied, "Ma'am, your choice seems quite clear. It is whether you will follow your grand-daddy or Jesus Christ."

When we consider our blessings at this Thanksgiving season, God also calls us to make choices. And to believe God's promises. I constantly remember the words of that great American philosopher Groucho Marx who said, "My greatest fear is that someday I will get what I deserve."

The Bible's answer to that fear is God's grace. We do not get what we deserve. When we stand before God at the judgment, we will not get what we deserve. If we did, hell would be full to overflowing. My only hope, your only hope is not that we get what we deserve either in death or in life. The Sunday before Thanksgiving is a time to remind most of us that we have not received what we deserve. We have received abundance according to God's grace: family and friends, job and security, a place to live and a church to nurture us, a free country and a rich land. Not according to our deserving—at all.

Even the ability to earn money, to have pleasure and be able to make trips, to have friends and enjoy success is a gift from God! To hold onto that gift, to be stingy and tight, is to deny its power. If we do not share our lives and our bounty, we sin, we blaspheme God's grace. But to share, to give back to the One who has given all to us is a gift to us from God.

But let's confess it: our gratitude is almost always mixed with fear. We Americans are powerfully good at vegetating away our anxiety by sitting in front of that tube that has petrified our brains or having another cocktail or indulging in the latest fad. Like Colonel T. E. Lawrence who became world-famous through his role as leader of the Arab revolt in World War I, we escape into the mechanisms of life, into its everydayness.

After his brilliant military exploits in the desert, Lawrence of Arabia (the name Lowell Thomas gave him), Lawrence enlisted as a common soldier in the ground personnel of the RAF. Why? He wrote: "I am doing this to serve a purely mechanical purpose, not as a driver but as a shadow of the machine..One of the benefits is to be merely a part of the machine. One teaches one's self that things do not depend on one person."

Lawrence had done great things, had fought against impossible odds, but when his work failed at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, he freed himself from life's anxieties not by continuing to ask questions about life's meaning but by ceasing to ask any questions at all. In other words, he ceased to be a full human being.

Like Thomas Carlyle's preacher, we know—at least for the most part—what is right. But the how of living out that ethic means that sometimes—perhaps often—we have to improvise. We have to grapple with the fact that every day we have decisions to make about which there do not seem to be clear biblical mandates, clear ethical choices. Is God silent on such matters? Or in God's creativity, are we too compelled to be creative and imaginative? Samuel Wells, the chaplain of Duke University, suggests that the Christian life is a kind of "improvisation." Actors are trained to learn their characters so well that they can cope when an entrance is botched or someone forgets the lines. The actor knows her or his character and stays in character. They improvise together with others on stage, not being original or innovative but consistent, faithful to the story.

We have to live out what is unscripted in the moment because we know what has been scripted. Much of God's will is clear, but we live the rest by improvisation based on studying the script, learning our parts and participating in the drama of love and sacrifice.

If we think of God's will as a script, we have to be careful to resist our understandable tendency to thumb ahead to the end of the drama to see how things turn out. One of my homiletical heroes, Leslie Weatherhead explained our problem:

Sometimes I have made a mistake myself by trying to discern the will of God for years ahead. I have come to the conclusion that God does not encourage us to see too far ahead. One simply must accept the fact that one has no idea where the road one is treading is going to lead. Suffice it to say that when one gets to the crossroads one will know which way to turn, and although we like to think that it is terribly important not to make a mistake—and I repeat one can never be certain that one has not made a mistake. . . .Our mistakes, if made in good faith, will not result in our being lost.

Faith does not mean that we know and agree to everything in advance. Faith, I believe, is a willingness to go wherever God leads, to do whatever God demands. A friend of mine has a note written by Mother Teresa. It reads: "Let God use you without consulting you."

Margaret Visser has written a book, *The Gift of Thanks: The Roots and Rituals of Gratitude*, which has just been issued. Because it came out in November and it has a sappy title, it will make some readers think it's another one of those Joel Osteen-type books that tell you how much God loves you and life is all about prosperity—like one of those Thanksgiving dinners that fill you with so much turkey and dressing and cranberry sauce and mince-meat pie that you want to crawl under the table and take a nap on the carpet.

Not so. Ms. Visser examines what gratitude is and how it functions in our lives. We learn from the earliest stages in our lives—thanks to parents, grandparents and teachers—to say "Thank you." Remember how you were urged almost before you could talk to say "Thank you"? Afraid as we are of offending anyone, we say those words at least a hundred times a day—without really meaning it a good deal of the time. On the other hand, think of how much hostility can build up among people when words of gratitude are not spoken.

In Dante's "Inferno" at the bottommost circle of hell, the ungrateful are punished by being eternally frozen in the postures of deference they had failed to perform during their lifetimes: trapped in enveloping ice, they stand erect or upside down, lie prone or bow face to feet.

There is a certain quality of humility that is required to be genuinely grateful. It means that we do not take things for granted or think we are entitled to all the blessings of our lives. As Emerson said, "We wish to be self-sustained. We do not quite forgive a giver. The hand that feeds us is in some danger of being bitten."

Do you remember Charles Dickens commending about being in a gathering of ministers in a cathedral and the meeting extended itself a long, long time, droning away on unimportant subjects without feeling. Mr. Dickens interrupted the proceedings by saying, "I have a suggestion. Why don't we move to a table and sit around the table and hold hands and see if we can make contact with the living."

Have you been in churches like that? I have. Have you been in clergy gatherings like that? I have. Have you been in church meetings that make you wonder if there is any living person there? I have. When we lose the gift of gratitude, when we spend more time on works than on grace, we lose life itself.

Fred Craddock told of his wife being away, so he decided to fix a big meal for himself. He stopped off at the local Winn Dixie to get a jar of peanut butter. He was in a hurry and those stores are so huge and who wants to spend the afternoon looking around? So Fred saw a woman who was pushing a cart in a kind of stroll and he approached her. "Um, lady, could you direct me to the peanut butter?"

She jerked around and said, "Are you trying to hit on me?"

Fred said, "I'm looking for the peanut butter." As he backed away, he saw a stock boy. "Where's the peanut butter," he asked. The young man said, "Down aisle five, on your left."

Fred went to aisle five, retrieved the peanut butter and went to check out—only to find the woman checking out also. "You *were* looking for the peanut butter," she said.

Fred said, "I told you I was looking for the peanut butter."

She said, "Well, nowadays you can't be too careful."

And Fred said, "Lady, yes you can. Yes you can."

God is calling us to transcend our careful, fearful, practical ways of living and respond to God's grace with openness and humility—to move from worry to wonder.