

A Stewardship Meditation on Matthew 6:25-33 for St. Matthew's Church, Worcester
The Rev. Dr. Richard M. Simpson
October 14, 2007

I have been invited to reflect with you today on the practice of Christian stewardship and God's abundant harvest, in the context of a shared meal celebrating the rich heritage of this parish. But I have to begin with a confession. When I think of the harvest, I think of people who love to play in the dirt and garden. There are so many profound theological things that can be said about seeds and tilling the earth and bringing in the sheaves. The thing is, I am not much of a gardener and I am really not the best person to say those profound things. Every time my wife tries to convince me to help her out in the yard I seem to end up with poison ivy. I am assuming Nancy knows this about me so perhaps something else is in order.

For me, harvest time is more about smells and what ends up on the table at dinnertime. Liturgically, that leads me to that great American heritage meal: Thanksgiving. I am a priest and pastor and preacher—and as such I am in need of a text. So as I thought about what I might share with you today, I looked over the readings that are appointed for Thanksgiving Day. The gospel appointed is from the sixth chapter of Matthew's gospel and I thought that must be a sign or something, to speak at St. Matthew's on a text from St. Matthew's gospel!

I'll get there—but first let's take a journey together, back to a place called Galilee, almost two thousand years ago. I want to invite you to listen again, as if for the first time, to this man named Jesus, who has been preaching and teaching and proclaiming “good news” of the Kingdom of God throughout that region. The Kingdom of God, he says, is both already here and still coming. He is a healer who has been curing diseases and casting out demons—a person committed to making people whole. As his ministry begins to take shape, news spreads fast. *Good news* about the dawn of a new day. And so the crowds begin to gather around him.

And so he takes his friends with him to a place away from the crowds. He and his disciples climb a mountain together. There he sits down before them—that is to say, he takes the posture of a first-century Jewish teacher. He gathers them around and he begins to teach them what it really means to put their trust in him. (Mt. 5:1) What he now says to them—what has come to be known to us as “The Sermon on the Mount”—needs to be heard anew in every generation. For we—the Church—are still being called away from the crowds to be still and to listen to him, to sit at his feet.

His words are difficult words that somehow manage both to turn the world we know upside down, and yet at the same time begin to put things right again—calling us back into who we really are and toward who we are meant to become. Jesus says that the poor are blessed. And those who mourn. He says that the meek will inherit the land, and that those who hunger and thirst will be satisfied. He says the merciful, and the clean of heart, and the peacemakers will all be called “children of God.” (Mt. 5:3-10) This is not the world we are used to living in—not the world we have grown accustomed to. Yet his message somehow manages both to comfort and to challenge us to be better people.

After these “beatitudes” (which is just a fancy Latin way of saying “blessings”) Jesus insists that we—ordinary common folk, fishermen and tax collectors, business people and nurses, social workers and teachers—are called to be a community that is “salt” and “light” for the world. (Mt. 5:13ff) We have been called in Holy Baptism to risk growth together by hearing, and reading, and marking his words, and then beginning to inwardly digest them until our lives begin to look like the Body of Christ—so that people look at us and see Him—raised from the dead and still at work in the world, through us.

He teaches us an ethic that is rooted in the old covenant given by Moses at Sinai and yet is recast in a way that is both more demanding and yet somehow more liberating. Demanding because love of enemies, and turning the other cheek, and going a second mile, and giving someone who wants the coat off our back our shirt as well does not come easily or naturally. Yet liberating as well, because Jesus doesn’t offer a new set of rules so much as a way of life. He calls us to live more boldly, more creatively, more radically. These words are liberating because they lead to abundant life and to reconciliation and transformation and to new possibilities.

Jesus then speaks on that mountain, with his friends gathered around him, almost (as I imagine it) in a whisper, about prayer. He offers a prayer that binds Christians together, even when they cannot perceive it: Orthodox and Catholic and Protestant and Anglican, evangelicals and progressives—a prayer that is not owned by any one group but shared by all. We say it together virtually every time we gather:

*Our father in heaven, hallowed is your name...
your kingdom come
your will be done,
on earth, as in heaven... (Mt. 6:7ff)*

He speaks of spiritual disciplines—of holy habits like fasting and stewardship. And it is only after all of that that he speaks the words of the Thanksgiving gospel reading. Do you remember it? Words of “good news” that are appointed for us each time we celebrate the harvest feast together. Words addressed to his friends, to the Church, to us:

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? Look 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? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But 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? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' The whole world runs after these things; and indeed your heavenly Father 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. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

“Don’t worry,” Jesus says. “Live your life one day at a time.” It is old wisdom we are still trying to live into. It’s the wisdom also found at the heart of twelve-step spirituality—wisdom you can find in other faith traditions as well. Because you cannot change the past, and you cannot control the future, there is only one way to really live life: *be fully present and alive in this moment.*

Jesus invites us in this teaching to do two things as an antidote to fear and anxiety. He invites us to look and to consider. *To look at the birds of the air*—to really look, until we can see. To open our eyes, and in so doing to see God’s hand at work in the world around us. What does it mean to develop this discipline of looking and seeing with wide open eyes?

I know that when I get stressed, when I feel overwhelmed, when I become anxious, the first thing that happens is that I begin to go blind. I fail to see what is right before my very eyes. There is nothing magical or terribly mystical about this. It is something we tend to do reasonably well as children, and often lose in the midst of the rat race we sometimes confuse for living. To look means first of all to slow down. To look at the geese who somehow know when fall comes that it is time to fly south, or a child (or a grandchild) or the big dipper, or the sunset is to come back into ourselves. It’s the first step, I think, to healing the anxiety that inflicts us.

Second, Jesus encourages us to consider “the lilies of the field.” I love that because we can talk about being stewards of God’s good creation, of taking care of “this fragile earth our island home”—and we should. But Jesus wants us to notice the details. We might just as easily consider raking leaves not as a chore that needs to be done, but as a spiritual exercise: consider the leaves. Or the marvel of how a maple tree can produce something that tastes so incredibly good on pancakes: consider that sweet syrup. Or consider spending a day on the top of Mt. Wachusett. When we consider the world we move into the right hemisphere of our brains to ponder and to be amazed and to wonder and to ask questions.

We are made for meditation and for contemplation. They are not an escape from reality but the pathway to discovering the heart of what is really real: when we look and consider we are called back into ourselves, back into our bodies again, back into “the Body of Christ” again. And once there, it is amazing how quickly we begin to let go of our fears and our worries and our anxieties.

Now you may think that I have forgotten why I was invited here in the first place. But maybe in the few remaining minutes I can try to explain why I think this has everything to do with why we are here. I am a parent with two teenagers who want to go to college. I am a relatively young man, told that I may not be able to count on social security so I need to plan for retirement. There is so much to be anxious about. I am a pastor, so I also understand the anxiety that can arise in congregations around this time of year when we ask people to share more of their time, talent, and treasure. We worry about how to do that and very often we begin with the premise, stated or unstated, that there doesn’t seem to be enough of any of those things. (Maybe in our busyness we feel that way about our time even more than our money. As an aside, if you read *Newsweek*, there was an excellent piece in the “My Turn” segment of the October 15 issue that I commend to you by a man from Stoneham about time.)

In the face of all of that fear, institutional preservation begins to kick in. We want our congregation to be able to pay the bills, and so we start to confuse Christian fundraising for the spiritual practice

of stewardship. Our anxiety blinds us to the harvest that is right before our very eyes. In those moments Jesus invites us to look and to consider.

Someone has said that if the only prayer you ever offer to God is “thanks” it will be enough. There is so much to be thankful for. Thankfulness isn’t about having it all; it’s about being thankful for what we do have and mindful of the needs of others so that in our desire to share we open our hands, and our hearts, in love.

Part of our New England heritage is that we have been taught not to talk much about money and quite frankly we sometimes try to defend what is really miserliness as “Yankee thriftiness.” We need to get over that. I don’t have a big “sales pitch” about giving in the church for you today, or a magic formula. I can tell you this—I think too many stewardship campaigns are rooted in anxiety, and I pray that yours will not be. I pray that it will be grounded in prayer and in a commitment to be growing as disciples of Jesus Christ. Stewardship is not first and foremost about money, but it has to include our money because otherwise it becomes a sham.

When we gather at our various tables each day of the year, or on Thanksgiving, or for a meal like this one today, we always have a choice: we can find fault and collect grievances and fixate on negative behaviors (all of which serve only to fuel anxiety and worry!) or...we can look, and we can consider. In so doing, we begin to discover there is so much to be thankful for—and that attitude of gratitude opens us up to a deeper relationship with Christ. We begin to see how the harvest really is plentiful and the laborers few. And perhaps we begin to wonder: maybe Jesus actually means for me to be one of those few, one of those who is taking the next steps in faith, sent out into the harvest to do the work that God gives us to do.

Thank you.