

“Thank You” – Mat 6:25-33 – Oct 8/06 (Thanksgiving Sunday)

Oh, it's that time of year again! The trees are in colour, the air has that certain Fall crispness, and the house flooded with the delightful smells of turkey dressing and apple pies. The dining room table is already prepared for the onslaught from family later today. At this time of year I reflect on all that I have ... good food, clothing, a nice truck, a new boat, a wonderful congregation, and a loving family, and the thought comes naturally and often, “I am truly blessed – thank you, Lord!” Of course, being thankful for so many good things in life seems natural this week, especially with this being Thanksgiving Sunday, and with the text from Matthew roaming through my mind.

These words of advice and directions in faith from Jesus don't directly talk about giving thanks, but the thread and theme of being appreciative runs clearly through it, even if at first glance it seems like Jesus was talking not about thankfulness but instead about not being anxious. “Therefore”, Jesus begins this particular piece of teaching and advice, and you students in the bible classes have probably already clued in on that word, recognizing he is providing a summary explanation for something he has already said. Let's refresh our memories as to what Jesus has already taught the crowds.

Matthew collects these and many other teachings into what we now call the ‘Sermon on the Mount’, a setting in which Jesus says a lot about what it means to be called blessed, and what it takes to be faithful. Along with such affirmations as “Blessed are the peacemakers” Jesus included many instructions cautioning the faithful to beware of practicing their piety in front of others in order to be seen. On the theme of prayer Jesus went on to tell them not to pray with heaped-up empty phrases like the Gentiles but to simplify their holy babble with the prayer he gave to them, the prayer we know and love and use as the Lord's Prayer. And then Jesus continued, “Do not store up for yourself treasures on earth, ... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven”, and then concluded, “therefore ... you cannot serve God and wealth.”

“Therefore ... you cannot serve God and wealth.” As we hear this conclusion we believe it to be about the struggle between faith and wealth. Indeed, monastic orders and others of deep faith have used this passage to justify a life of poverty, relying on their needs being supplied by God acting through the charity of the faithful. But there's much more to this particular instruction from Jesus than just a simple struggle between faith and wealth – indeed Jesus concludes that with the right priorities one will lead to the other.

“Do not be anxious” Jesus also tells his listeners, and Matthew and Luke echo his words, giving us a clue that both the people gathered around Jesus and the people in the early church did worry, that indeed they shared with us an anxiety about the necessities of life. “How can we not be anxious?”, we also ask, echoing the same questions asked by people sitting on hillsides overlooking the Sea of Galilee, by people sitting in their homes in the city of Rome, and by people on the far borders of the Empire. People anxious that being known as Christians will cost them dearly; people guilty about having to spend their time and energy and money on feeding and clothing their family instead of participating in the church; people fraught with worry that they are losing the struggle between faith and wealth.

They need to hear, we need to hear, that this message is not saying we have only a black-or-white choice in front of us, but instead that we need to find the right balance in faith, about remembering what is important to God and in God's kingdom.

Before we go on, we need to clear up another point in this message, so again let's go back a bit. Recall that in this part of Jesus' teaching we are cautioned not to be like the Gentiles, focusing on food, drink, and fine clothes. If this was all we heard we might well come away confused, because we are the Gentiles. Does Jesus mean we are to struggle with the basics of who we are? Well, in a sense, yes he means exactly that, but it's not because he was an anti-Gentile Jewish zealot. Jesus also had plenty

to say about the danger of behaving like a Jewish hypocrite. His attacks were balanced, challenging both hyper-pious Jews and non-pious Gentiles alike. It seems fairly clear that Jesus was saying “don’t be like those at either end of the spectrum between over-religious and non-religious”. On the one hand Jesus says don’t be like those zealots who practice their religion with a focus of “look at me and how pious I am” and in almost the same breath he says don’t be like those at the opposite end of the scale, abandoning all thought of God in favour of worldly pleasures.

We can readily imagine the people of whom Jesus spoke in his own time ... the ultra-orthodox Pharisaic Jew and the licentious Greek playboy. However, it doesn’t take much imagination to also recognize people today from both ends of the spectrum identified by Jesus. We still have plenty of people who exercise their faith primarily to be seen as faithful. Some of the specific symbols have changed, with dog-eared floppy bibles replacing little cubes bound to the forehead for example, but their thirst to be seen as perfectly righteous is still all-consuming. At the same time there is no shortage of people who could be described as the new, improved version of the wine-and-dine Gentile, happily (or unhappily as is more often the case) enslaved to the gods of wealth and pleasure.

Jesus cautions those who would hear that being at either end of this spectrum run the risk of losing out on the rewards of God’s kingdom. He even tells us how to avoid both traps, namely to “strive first for the kingdom of God and for his righteousness”, the old familiar “seek ye first...”. But what exactly does that mean? What do we look for? How can we strive for something we don’t understand and might not recognize when we see it? How can we have some assurance, how can we be ‘not anxious’ about our faith?

One possibility is to recognize that there is something common about the people found on both ends of the faith-wealth spectrum, and that is their focus on self. You’ve probably heard me talk about what I’m calling the “sin of a sense of entitlement”, that feeling that somehow one is “entitled” to fame, fortune, or even favour from God ... people from both ends of the spectrum seem subject to this failing. Jesus’ call for us to be in the middle instead of at either end of the spectrum thus calls us to turn our focus to somewhere other than ourselves. If not on ourselves, where then should our focus be? We’re only left with two options, on God, and on other people – starts to sound a bit like “seek first God’s kingdom and His righteousness”, doesn’t it? This begins to sound a lot like the other things Jesus had to say about how we should live out our faith, doesn’t it – loving God, loving others?

With this perspective now this direction from Jesus sounds less like a call to poverty, to nakedness, to a monastic existence as it sounds like a call to live our lives dividing our attention between God and other people, serving them as he has served us, confident in our faith that not only will God provide all that we need but that we will be rewarded with the gift of finding ourselves deep in the middle of his kingdom.

Lest we are anxious about our own faith, recognize that there are many good and faithful people who fall both in the middle of this spectrum between zealotry and secularism and are solidly in the middle of God’s kingdom. People of deep but not showy faith, people who quietly converse with God in prayer, who quietly go about the business of the kingdom, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, visiting the lonely. People who are so busy carrying God’s love to others that they don’t have time to worry about themselves. People who give generously of themselves and what they have, and don’t care who knows it – in fact, prefer that nobody except God and themselves know it. People who are so busy thanking God for their blessings that they have neither time nor desire nor need to ask for either more attention or a new SUV.

It’s important to recognize and acknowledge that there are countless people who respond to Christ’s call to avoid both ends of the religious-secular spectrum, and who live in the middle ground seeking both the kingdom of God and the righteousness of God, and there are congregations who do so

as well. More importantly, both individuals and congregations alike can change, are able to move away from either end of the spectrum, can turn from sucking all the attention that is available and start paying attention to the needs of others, to stop saying “look at me” and start saying “let me help you see God”.

Yes, such congregations, and such individuals exist. And on this Thanksgiving Sunday I give thanks for both here at Central, thanks both for people who heed this call to true and humble righteousness, and for a congregation that helps those who are seeking the kingdom to find it. The literature is clear that congregations that continue to focus inward upon self, holding that the congregation exists to serve its members, are the congregations that are shriveling and dying. On the other hand, those congregations that have turned their attention from inward to outward, seeking the kingdom of God and his righteousness through serving the community around them are starting to recognize the truth in Jesus’ promise that in so doing, all the rest will be given to us.

What better time is there than this moment, this Thanksgiving Sunday, to hear anew Christ’s call to turn outwards, to seek the kingdom, and to realize just how privileged we are and how blessed we are to be considered part of God’s kingdom and heirs of His righteousness through his grace in His Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. Thank you my brothers and sisters in Christ; thank you, Central Church; thank you, God.