



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Thursday November 24th 2016 – Thanksgiving

“Be not therefore anxious for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.”

**✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Ghost ✠**

As a child who attended public primary school in America in the 1980s, I grew up with a very precious and fantastic understanding of what Thanksgiving was all about. And every year, our teachers made sure to drill it deeper into our heads so that we could recite it on command. It was always the same old narrative, of course - the pilgrims came here after being driven out of England by religious zealots; zealots who, for what it's worth, were **us** - those pesky Anglicans. Anyway, they arrived ill prepared, and after a rough season, generous Native Americans brought them a turkey and some pie and then everybody watched football and lived happily ever after.

To be certain, this had as much in common with the actual story and meaning of Thanksgiving as a fat man in a suit at Macy's has with the story of Saint Nicholas, but the teachers insisted on drilling it into our heads every year during primary school. And one teacher in particular had the job of drilling it into our heads more than any other - the dreaded music teacher. I say “dreaded” not because I dislike music; I continue to write, record, and perform music to this day, but I do so despite my music teacher, not because of her. The woman had a strong and evident dislike of me. When we would play trivia games for prizes, and other students would guess the name of the composer correctly, they'd get sheets of stickers with helicopters and fighter jets on them; I'd get a pencil. This was the early 1980s, and Bruce Springsteen and the E.

Street Band were huge, and Clarence Clemons had made the saxophone cool again. As such, when we tried out for instruments for the school band, I immediately chose the sax. The teacher, however, gave it to one of the students that she liked, and stuck me with the impenetrably and impossibly uncool bass clarinet. And when it came time for us to do our roles in the school Thanksgiving play, was I the brave pilgrim who came to the new world with nothing more than buckle shoes and a tall hat? Was I perhaps the noble Native American who put prejudice aside and showed up with a pumpkin pie and a Lands End catalog? Or was I at least the turkey, which might be fitting for a chubby little kid? No, I was none of these things, but I do recall being “tree #1” or “large bush, stage left,” neither of which had speaking roles.

So the truth is, I didn't really start to appreciate Thanksgiving as a religious holiday until I was well into adulthood; I can honestly say the reality of the religious value of Thanksgiving wasn't evident to me until I became an Anglican. Like many Americans, I had learned to think of Thanksgiving as “Turkey Day,” and to associate it with binge eating, goading people with political debates, and hoping to catch up with my friends at the pub after the festivities were done. But this morning's Gospel reading is a perfect example of exactly why we need to see Thanksgiving through a Gospel lens, to see just how very thankful we should be.

In this passage, Jesus disabuses us of all the things that cripple us as Christians, and as witnesses and evangelists. The fact is we are, as Bible scholar J.R. Dummelow says, “oppressed with care.” When we allow ourselves to be caught up in the worry of the world, we oppress ourselves with it, and slowly lose sight of what’s important; we lose sight of Christ, and we lose sight of serving others. When we immerse ourselves in worry and anxiety, we are unable to be Christ’s hands on Earth, and to do the job He’s given us.

God created us to love us, and for us to love Him. Mankind is the focal point of God’s Creation, and our relationship with Him is front and center in the grand narrative of the universe. That is why Jesus compares us to the birds of the sky or the flowers of the field. The birds, over which we have dominion and which aren’t inherently made in God’s image, are given a provision by the Father though they do nothing to earn it. Even the grass of the field is clothed and adorned by the lilies, though it is used to fuel stoves the next day.

This is a wonderful thing to give thanks for - that Jesus tells us that the soul focus of our life is to pursue God’s righteousness, and that all other things will flow from that. We cannot sit and wring our hands and allow the threats of tomorrow to invade today, because doing so prevents us from doing today’s work - if you’re too busy sitting at the table worrying about the test results for that funky mole, or if a loved one is going to sober up, or your job will still be there tomorrow, you’ve already made sure you can’t do your heavenly job today. The apostle Mark tells us “*And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful.*” Literally, focusing on all these other things **chokes the word** in us, and makes it unfruitful. We cease being Christ’s body on Earth, and instead become little vessels of worry that are incapable of doing much else. This was summarized by a joke I read the other day, where God on the sixth day says to an angel, “Behold, I have created mankind.” And the angel replies “You’ve gone and ruined a perfectly good monkey is what you did. Look at it. It’s got anxiety.”

Now, this isn’t to say that we aren’t to labor and plan and be good stewards of what we’ve been given. But we must trust that our good labor done, that God will give us what we require

otherwise. And we must always have hearts that are thankful; indeed, the two biggest prayers we can offer God are repentance and thanksgiving. And as much as it’s difficult to embrace Christ’s command to not be anxious, it’s equally difficult to listen to the instructions of the apostle Paul, when he says in his 1st epistle to the Thessalonians, “*In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.*” We need to remember that a state of thanksgiving is a good state to be in, even when the chips are down. And we must remember that sometimes, what may seem like a trial to us is simply God making sure we’re ready for the next stage of our journey. Or as C.S. Lewis put it, “*We are not necessarily doubting that God will do the best for us; we are wondering how painful the best will turn out to be.*”

Really, the times when we’re not feeling especially thankful in our hearts, is the time to work the hardest to cultivate a feeling of thanksgiving; to remember that a state of thanksgiving is a natural state of the created before the Creator. So during times of trial, we must remember to be thankful that things aren’t as bad as they could be, because practically speaking, things are never as bad as they can be until you’re dead and separated from God forever.

When things look bad and we’re hurting, we should at least give thanks that we have something upon which to pin our hope, and that we don’t suffer from the God-sized hole in the universe that our faithless friends do. Or even worse, we could believe in a god or gods so capricious that he or she or they only ever saw us as justified or sanctified by our own actions. And since we know that no amount of good works can atone for sin, we’d find ourselves on the hamster wheel of karma, never reaching a level of perfection sufficient enough to merit that god’s favor.

Ultimately, we need to daily give thanks for the fact that we’re stuck on none of these things, and that our salvation and entire being is based on the words of Jesus in John 3:16 - “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*” **Amen**