

Thanksgiving Day Sermon – November 26, 2003
PLTS Chapel of the Cross
Carol R Jacobson

Joel 2:21-17

Hymn of the Day: **760 [For the Fruit of All Creation]**

Psalm 126

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Matthew 6:25-33

*Almighty God, source of every blessing, your generous goodness comes to us anew every day.
By the work of your Spirit lead us to acknowledge your goodness, give thanks for your benefits,
and serve you in willing obedience; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

“Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” This question from today’s gospel text has been bothering me since I began to prepare for worship today. “Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” I can’t stop wondering – why does Jesus ask this question? After all, it has such an obvious answer. Of **course** the real meaning of life is something much more profound than the basics of existence – more than just the food we eat or the clothes we wear from day to day. So, why would Jesus and the gospel writer spend time “proclaiming the obvious” to us in this text?

Some commentators suggest that Jesus could very well be “tweaking” the religious leaders of his day with the question -- those who had become a bit too preoccupied with having full pantries and quality clothing. Jesus and the gospel writer are critiquing such persons, they say, in an effort to awaken repentance in these religious elite for their greed and self-preoccupation. Luther, too, interprets Jesus’ question as both a **description of** and a **challenge to** the destructive power of humanity’s persistent obsession with possessions. Although Luther acknowledges that **some** concern about food and clothing is a necessary part of living, he describes an obsessive self-preoccupation with these things as “like being concerned about the beautiful decoration of your house, but not knowing who was going to live there, or being concerned in the kitchen about the preparation of a big, expensive meal but not having anybody to eat it.”¹ “Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” Indeed!

But a deep irony and a disturbing pathos contained in Jesus’ question occurred to me while I was reading the 2003 *State of the World* report. First, the deep irony. The *State of the World* report, published annually by the Worldwatch Institute, reports that approximately 27,000 children die of

¹ Martin Luther, “The Sermon on the Mount,” trans. by J. Pelikan in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 21 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 195.

starvation and hunger- related diseases **each day** in our world. **27,000 children each day**. The report goes on to say that

...while the world's **underfed** population has declined slightly since 1980 to 1.1 billion, [1.1 billion!!], the number of **overweight** people has surged to 1.1 billion [1.1 billion!!]. **Both** the overweight and the underweight suffer from malnutrition, either a **deficiency** or an **excess** in a person's intake of nutrients and other dietary elements needed for healthy living. ... In the developing world, there are 150 million underweight children, nearly one in three. And in Africa, both the share and the absolute number of children who are underweight are on the rise. Meanwhile, the population of overweight people has expanded rapidly in recent decades. ... In the United States [alone], 55 percent of adults are overweight by international standards.²

These are sobering realities indeed, made all the more so by everything **else** we know about the “politics” of food here on planet Earth in the early 21st century – how food is grown and who is allowed to grow it; how food is distributed and who has access to it; how food is withheld or provided as a political enticement and so forth. Hence the irony I experience in Jesus’ question, “is not life more than food?” These days, it appears that for billions of us, life is all about food – either the extreme lack of it or the sheer overabundance of it. We know this and it makes us anxious. The more we think about it, the more we worry and feel powerless to address the reality of human hunger and human obesity. After all, what can be done about this complex and persistent problem? What should we be doing to address this abysmal state of things?

Which brings me to the pathos that I hear in Jesus’ question, “is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?” We know the grim realities of those who have too little and we who have too much, and we worry about these things. I would venture to say that everyone in this assembly today **knows** the global scandals of food and clothing production all too well, and worries that he or she is not doing enough to correct these inequalities. We **would** do something, almost **anything**, if we just knew what we **could** do that would really make a difference. Jesus understands our worry, friends, and shares our deep sadness in the face of the helplessness we feel to really change things. Instead of “proclaiming the obvious” by asking his question, perhaps Jesus is revealing the depth of the knowledge he has both about the real world and its injustices **and** about the human heart and its tendency toward debilitating anxiety and self-preoccupation. Jesus understands our quandary, and in today’s text offers us a way to re-orient our way of life.

² Gardner, Gary and Brian Halwell, *Worldwatch Paper #150: Underfed and Overfed: The Global Epidemic of Malnutrition*, March 2000. Brackets and emphasis mine.

First, Jesus says, “do not worry.” Do not be anxious about your life. Do not spend your days and your energies with anxiety as your constant companion. Good work if you can get it, but how in the world can we just “not worry?” Merely saying, “don’t worry” is certainly not enough. Indeed, if “don’t worry” is considered as a command, it may in fact make us all the **more** anxiety-ridden. Now we must add “worry about our tendency to worry” to the list of what we are not doing right. Nevertheless, Jesus says, “don’t worry.” But he doesn’t stop there. Consider, if only for a moment, he says, that there is another, far more fruitful, approach to living. Jesus points out that the birds and the wildflowers already know about this different way of living. They do **not** worry, whereas it seems all we can do some days is worry. Take a moment, Jesus encourages, to observe how the birds and the flowers “live” and consider what they might be able to teach you about better **human** living.

How **do** wildflowers and birds live? How can we learn to be less anxious from them? According to Luther the birds are our schoolmasters and teachers. He calls sparrows theologians and nightingales preachers on the topic of anxiety. Luther has similar words of praise for the wildflowers that grow in the fields.³ What is their secret to an anxiety-free existence? Luther suggests that they must and they do entrust their bodies and their very existence to their creator – to God. They **cannot** secure their own existence by their own wits and so they must trust God for all they have. The birds and the wildflowers do with ease what we fight mightily against, namely to recognize that all we have, every breath we take, every meal we eat, every thing we need comes from God. Birds and flowers live this way, but we do not **want** to live this way. Every fiber of our being resists putting our lives in God’s hands and favors a “plan B,” one in which we have some control over the quality and length of our existence. This “plan B” may seem like an end to having to worry, but it really is the beginning of even more worry, isn’t it? As Luther writes,

...forget your anxieties, since you cannot accomplish anything by them. It does not depend upon your anxiety but upon His knowledge and concern. If nothing grew in the field unless we were anxious about it, we would all have died in our cradles; and during the night, while we are lying asleep, nothing could grow. Indeed, even by worrying ourselves to death we could not make a single blade of grass grow in the field. We really ought to see and understand that God gives everything without any anxiety on our part.... Though it is up to Him to be concerned, as a father is concerned for his children, we refuse to leave it to Him.”⁴

³ Luther, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 197-200,

⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

So much for “plan B,” Luther seems to be saying. It won’t do us any good anyway. It is God who is concerned for the welfare of the world and all its inhabitants. It is God who promises to care for the whole world and to defeat injustice. And it is God who has both the power and the will to do so. Both God’s promise and God’s power to do so are certain and have been revealed to the whole world in God’s most powerful act – the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. Because this is so, Luther goes on to say that for Christians the choice is clear: “a Christian must reflect [upon] and then forsake his greedy anxiety.”⁵ Whenever we catch a glimpse of our own anxiety and the ways in which it drives our lives, Luther and Jesus encourage us to remember our teachers – the birds and the wildflowers – and to remember that God does not **need** nor **desire** our anxiety, but calls upon us to live in another way.

What is this “other way?” According to our gospel text today, this other way rejects anxiety as either the guarantee of the good life or as an “unfortunate necessity” in these modern, troubled times. This other way of living, Jesus says, strives for God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness instead. Perhaps the word “strive” here is an unfortunate translation, since we often associate striving with “trying really hard.” Other translations of this text use the word “seek” instead. “Seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness” they read. This seems a better way of putting it, since “seeking” implies both an activity and a goal without the unfortunate connotation of devising a “plan C” for which we ourselves strive. Whatever the translation, this other way of living Jesus is talking about involves rejecting the notion that **our anxiety** will be what changes things in the world or saves us from being dependent upon God for our very existence. Rather, this other way embraces God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness as the only reality that can truly change things or accomplish our salvation from anxiety, greed, and self-preoccupation. To seek God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness means first of all to acknowledge and give thanks to God for the gift of our lives, which come from God’s grace alone and belong to God alone. To seek God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness is not to “look up yonder” for a different world, but to live in **this** world in particular ways. As my pastor said in her sermon on Sunday, those who seek God’s kingdom “live and serve in the midst of the world and live lives forever linked to others.”⁶ Not everyone in the world lives this way, but for those who seek God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness, it is the **only** way to live.

⁵ Ibid., 201.

⁶ Lucy Kolin, “The Reign of Christ,” preached November 23, 2003, Resurrection Lutheran Church, Oakland, CA.

And so, the kingdom of God for which we seek is “not so much a place as it is a people.”⁷ A people like us. **We** are the kingdom of God, living and breathing the power and the promise of God’s love and care for all creation on everyone and everything we encounter from day to day. We are those who have responded to the gospel’s call to give up on our anxious quest for self-sufficiency and to rely instead on God alone. But, thanks be to God, we don’t have to “go it alone.” God promises to be with us and we, as a community marked with the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, promise to be with one another in this life of discipleship our text calls “seeking God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness.” That is, after all, why we gather for worship. To give thanks to God and to find strength together to keep seeking the presence of God’s reign in our world. That is why we listen to the Word of God and take it to heart. That is why we pray. And, that is why we eat and drink together at the Lord’s table. We are the ones called to seek God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness with our whole selves. So come to the table and eat. Come and receive the promise and the power of God, who **longs** to draw near to you, to **live** in you, and to accomplish **through** you his kingdom and his righteousness. Amen.

⁷ Ibid.