

Harvest Thanksgiving A Sermon on Matthew 6:24-33

To better understand this Gospel story, we need to go back thousands of years to the time when the Hebrew people were slaves in Egypt. The Pharaoh drove the Hebrews to exhaustion – working them tirelessly, gathering and building, and when they didn't measure up they were beaten. The Pharaoh was a man obsessed with acquiring more...more buildings, more grain, more animals, more slaves, more...And he was a very wealthy, very powerful man. But underneath, he was scared. The Pharaoh was scared that he didn't have enough – he didn't have enough to be the *most* wealthy, he didn't have enough to be the *most* powerful, he didn't have enough. That fear drove the obsessive desire to acquire more.

The drive for more fuelled by the fear of not enough was like a flood water roaring out from the Pharaoh and soaking through the rest of his society. The next person in the chain of command knew he wasn't quite as wealthy or powerful as the Pharaoh but he was going to make darn sure that he had enough of everything he could possibly acquire in order to put himself solidly in the number 2 spot, living in constant fear that the guy in the number 3 spot would acquire more than him and bump him out of his position. And so on down the line, everyone acquiring what they could to have the most wealth and power they could possibly muster, fearful that they would never have enough. It was a way of operating in life that bred jealousy and competition, your worth was based on what you had, what position you held, rather than what kind of person you were. In this society, there was not enough for everyone because the people at the top had more than they could ever need and the people at the bottom had almost nothing. In this society, you didn't love your neighbour – you were in competition with your neighbour. You would, on occasion, help out someone who was at your

social level or higher because that would boost your status, plus they could pay you back, return the favour. But you certainly wouldn't help out those beneath you – they could never pay you back or boost your status. If this description of society sounds familiar, it should, and we will return to this thought.

God removed his people from this exhausting and poisonous way of life, using Moses as their leader, and God showed to the Hebrew people his way of being – a way grounded in love and compassion, sharing all things in common, caring for those who were slipping down below the status of the rest of the people, and putting the kibosh on those who were elevating themselves above the status of the rest of the people. God laid out the foundational rules for living such an existence together and tried to teach them that this way of life was entirely possible if they gave up their destructive cycle of fear of not enough, fuelling the drive for more and, instead, relied first on God's ability to provide for all of their needs. God had, after all, created a world that could – and still can – sustain all life.

The Hebrew people couldn't do it, though. They could not stick to such a radically different way of living, a way of living completely opposite to the way they had been living. Over the centuries, God sent prophet after prophet to this wayward people – pleading with them to turn back to God's ways, warning them of the consequences if they did not. Finally, God's Son came to us to plead with us and to warn us.

The words we hear Jesus speak today are the same words spoken by God when he brought his people out of Egypt, the same words spoken by the prophets over hundreds of years. "Do not worry," Jesus tells the people. His words have the

strength of a command. Do not worry about what you will eat and what you will wear. This sounds out of step with the poverty the people were experiencing. How could they not worry when they didn't have enough to eat and their clothes were rags on their backs? Jesus is well aware of the needs of his people. The point he is making is one of priority and reliance...You cannot serve both God and wealth he tells them. Serving wealth changes our orientation – serving wealth turns us away from relying on God and causes us to rely on ourselves, on our ability to acquire enough to survive and to thrive. Serving wealth turns our desire away from God and causes us to desire more and more of what the world has to offer in terms of the world's thinking that more equals better. The man driving the Lexus is somehow seen as better than the guy driving the Chevy Malibu. And heaven help the 10 year old who doesn't have a pair of brand name running shoes on her feet during gym class. She's going to get whispered about as the "mean girl" clique huddles together, pointing at her feet.

Get your priorities straight, Jesus tells us. Turn your reliance back to God. Turn your desire to God. Turn your desires to what God desires for you and for the world. "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these other things will be given to you as well."

Strive first for the kingdom. Jesus was different from the prophets because he wasn't just a prophet. As God in the flesh, Jesus wasn't simply telling people about the kingdom, he had brought the kingdom with him. He wasn't just teaching and healing as signs of what the kingdom would be like. He wasn't just the instrument God was using to reveal the kingdom. He was the foretaste of the kingdom – he lived the kingdom life because he embodied the kingdom. Jesus

showed to people the perfection awaiting them when they turned their reliance and their desire solely back to God. Jesus showed us the perfection of the two great commandments – Love God, love neighbour – when he died on the cross instead of fighting back.

We couldn't do it, though. We could not stick to such a radically different way of living, a way of living completely opposite to the way being lived around us in the world. In the first couple of centuries after Jesus died, Christians stuck out like sore thumbs because they were living differently from the non-believers around them – sharing all things in common, loving everyone. That all changed when Emperor Constantine made Christianity legal. Everyone became Christians because that was the thing to do and so the way that society in general was living became the way that Christians in general were living. Christians since very often do not behave any differently than any other person. You, generally speaking, cannot simply look at a person and their lifestyle and say, "Oh that person is a Christian." We are quite firmly enmeshed in the way of the world and, unless we decide to live in a monastery or other special community, it is an effort to live any differently – to share all things in common, to love everyone equally.

It is an effort, even for us, the faithful – the ones who perhaps are seen by society as the ones who should be living differently, striving for the kingdom, relying on God, desiring God and what God desires. We worry about not enough and we are in the pursuit of more. There are not enough people in the pews. There are not enough young people. There is not enough money. There are not enough of us to do large fundraisers. Not enough. We worry and we strategize – how do we get more of all of those things of which we do not have enough?

Strive first for the kingdom, Jesus tells us. Strive first for the kingdom and the rest will fall into place. The church vitality experts have discovered that this is, indeed, true. We hear them say this to us – echoing the words of Jesus – but we find it difficult to truly live into those words. Strive first for the kingdom. If we hear it often enough, perhaps the truth of these words will eventually displace the loud voice of the world that keeps shouting at us to try worldly ways of attracting more people, more youth, more money.

Allen Stanton, Christian author and contributor to the “Lewis Centre for Church Leadership” tells us evangelism is not about trying the latest, greatest fads and programs for attracting people into your congregation. “Instead,” he says, “we want to enact the kingdom of God or announce the kingdom of God. We want to form the community in a way that the kingdom of God is visible; and people are able to live into that. Evangelism is the ability and the practice of recognizing the kingdom of God, cultivating the kingdom of God, announcing the kingdom of God, and inviting the wider community to participate in that kingdom of God” (L.C.C.L article “Building Thriving Rural Congregation”). How do we do this?

Despite the effort it will take, we are called to live differently. The small things will make an impression – like being the one to end the conversation when someone is trying to pull you into hurtful gossiping. Saying “no” to another coat that you don’t need because someone needs it more than you do. Refraining from the purchase of yet another gadget you really don’t need but simply wanted. Being an advocate for the environment. Sharing all that we can share, loving all people as equals.

Robert Warren has studied and written about growing churches for many years. He has learned that, regardless of the type of congregation – big or small, rural or urban – growing congregations have one thing in common: Numbers are not their focus...”Much more typical,” he says, “was the sense that these churches were seeking to ‘be the church better.’ What they were doing was taking their faith seriously and seeking to be church to the very best of their ability” (Healthy Churches Handbook, p.13-14). Relying on God, desiring what God desires, understanding that the good news is that God’s kingdom is here and available to all people who choose the kingdom life. Let us strive first for the kingdom.