

Arvada
United Methodist Church

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“When Thanks Seems Upside Down”
Matthew 5: 1-11

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I'm sure everyone here has their favorite Thanksgiving meal story. It would be fun to hear those from each other. I remember one particular Thanksgiving meal as a child. Everyone was gathered at the table, standing around it ready to say grace, and I was in the bathroom, doing my best to hurry as they called for me. I ran up to the table, slid between my brothers and took their hands; and as my grandfather began his long prayer filled with thees and thous, one of my brothers leaned over and said in a whisper just loud enough so I and my other brother could hear, “Did you wash your hands?” And we lost it. You know, the kind of losing it where you can't get it back. Children are more prone to this kind of losing it than adults, and we were very prone. My grandfather continued his surely beautiful prayer as our laughter grew, and spread, until most of us were laughing even if we didn't know why.

Thanksgiving is a rather awkward holiday. We live in an in between time, between the ways of the past when we weren't such a mobile culture and everyone really did go home, and the ways of the present where most people aren't sure where to call their true home. In the past many families really did get together, but these days there are often a lot more miles to traverse. Still, traditions are followed, like worship in the morning for some and the Macy's parade on the TV for others; the feast meal will likely occur at some point during the day, and most will follow the law apparently inscribed on the walls that says no turkey sandwiches until dinner time, and certainly not at the main meal even though the rolls and turkey are right there. And on more days than any other during the year, there will be praying at that main meal, perhaps even with children losing it during the prayer in some homes.

And as prayers are offered for the abundance in our lives and on our tables, there will also be some hearts heavy with sorrow, or heavy with worry, and there will be whispering little voices piping up with silent thoughts such as, “We don't actually have as much to be grateful for this year as we did a few years ago. What has happened?” Or that trumping silent thought, “It sure would be easier to feel grateful if only ____ were here.”

How do we find gratitude when we aren't feeling grateful? How do we say thanks when doing so seems simply upside down?

(Prayer)

The Sermon on the Mount is found in Matthew 5-7, and in Luke 6, where it takes place on a flat plane. Its teachings are widely considered to be as close to the original, earliest reports of Jesus as is possible.

The sermon starts with what we call the Beatitudes, the blessings, then goes on into many of the more famous teachings of Jesus. See how many you recognize. Count them, if you want, as they go by:

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You have heard that it was said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you, love...

Don't store up treasures on earth where moth and rust consume.

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Beware of practicing piety before others -- when giving alms, praying, fasting...

Here's how to pray, Our father...

No one can serve two masters...

Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will wear.

Consider the lilies...

Don't judge lest you be judged...

Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you shall find.

Enter thru the narrow gate, for the gate is wide that leads to destruction.

How many of you recognized at least 5 of them? How many of you recognized all of them?

Jesus ends the sermon in both Matthew and Luke with something like this:
“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.”

Jesus is up to something here, and not just dooming every preacher to a sorry sermon after his. Of course, he's always up to something, but here he's really up to something. Something like turning our worlds upside down. Something like pointing out the ultimate choice we have each moment. Something like trying to teach us what a life filled with the divine looks like, and how it differs from a life that is other than that. Something like inviting us into a perspective that stretches our daily consciousness, and maybe our hearts and souls. Something like telling us what truly matters, and how when we build our lives on that no storms can take their value.

Most of his teachings in these passages go against our cultural milieu, just as much now as then:

Love those who persecute you? Tell that to a Palestinian trying to get home.

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Enter thru the narrow gate? Tell that to a farmer herding cows, or the democrats trying to prevent a filibuster.

Don't worry about what to wear? Tell that to two co-pastors and a choir director all wondering which color stole the others are wearing on a Sunday morning that is traditionally Christ the King Sunday when we're not following the traditional lectionary.

Don't worry about what we're gonna eat? Hang on... Thanksgiving meal is coming up! While some are worried about what to prepare, others are worried about that law inscribed on the walls, and how to get around it this year.

What about all those "blessed are" statements... Blessed are the poor? The meek? The mourning? The persecuted? This is not exactly normal thinking going on here.

Of course, Jesus wasn't inviting us into a normal life.

A normal life driven by the culture around us tells us to measure the value of our lives by things very different from what Jesus tells us to measure it by.

In these teachings, Jesus is inviting us into a different quality of life. It's a quality of life not dependent on material satisfaction, or how well people love us, or on how much we have; it's a quality of life that isn't erased when we are grieving or yearning or persecuted, imprisoned, homeless or ill.

He's inviting us into a quality of life that is divine-oriented, not self-oriented; a quality of life that persists no matter what, uninhibited by our normal definitions of happiness. It's a quality of life that isn't about happiness at all, but rather, fulfillment.

Running through the stories we have about Jesus is a thread of invitation from him into a life that is deeper and broader than what most of human culture is used to. The best term may well be abundant life. It is characterized by a freedom of heart, an awareness of ultimate love, an easy commitment to compassion.

Such a life based in true abundance is not without sorrow, but sorrow is softened by an eternal perspective. Such a life is not without difficulty, but difficulty is placed properly in the scheme of things, rendering it powerless to consume a love-filled heart. Such a life is not without yearning, but the yearning causes one to lean into God, to lean into the divine realm so that the life might flourish more fully, more abundantly, more freely, more compassionately each day.

This, I believe, is the invitation of the beatitudes: trust the abundant life that flows as an underground river no matter what. Be a part of that, and everything becomes blessed. Everything, no matter what.

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Which brings us to Thanksgiving. How do we do Thanksgiving, naming our blessings, when life has turned on its head? How do we be grateful when so much that we once had is gone?

We re-orient our hearts, our minds, our lives. We find abundance in what is endless. We listen to what is eternal. And we go to the tiny. The tiny always has something in it for us to be grateful for. The tiny ray of sunshine that streams through the window. The sound of a cat playing with a toy in the bathtub. A child's next new word, barely discernible as it is. The way the plate really does look quite beautiful with its colorful display of foods. And, of course, that first bite into a turkey sandwich that we've waited all day for, even dreaming about it during the feast meal.

The tiny is endless. The tiny is eternal. The tiny never runs out of what is good. There is always something in the tiny to make our heart smile. Always.

But listening to the tiny might mean giving up what the great big culture shouts to us about how to be happy. Listening to the tiny might mean looking at things upside down. And that's okay because right there, in the upside down, is Jesus invitation into abundant life.

When we have trouble being grateful, when saying thanks seems contrary to everything in us, when it just seems upside down to give thanks, we're off to a really good start. Because in our up-side-down-ness, there is Jesus telling us things that seemed crazy when we were right side up, things like, blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall inherit the earth; and, blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. And blessed are the persecuted. I don't know about you, but when I'm all upside down those things seem to almost make sense.

And I know they point to a perspective on life that is good and true and eternal, in all its tininess. It's life abundant, and it's being offered now, no matter what. We can be abundantly thankful for that.