

November 22, 2015



“What Does Love Look Like? Gratitude”

Sermon by Rev. Robert English

John 15:9-13

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Just a show of hands, how many people are worried about Christmas?

The shopping, the decorating, the travel, the parties, that internal deep seated belief that if one thing is off then the entire holiday will be ruined. But, wait, you might be thinking, what about Thanksgiving? Oh we've been worrying about that since Halloween.

We live in anxious times. Some of us live a fast paced, always connected, don't have time to smell the roses, I've got to take this call, while I answer this email, and send a text - kind of life. It can seem relentless sometimes. Our lives mapped out on a calendar of events with reminders and all the while projecting an image of holding it all together and balancing it gracefully.

This may or may not sound like your life. Maybe you are unemployed or underemployed and you are worried about a future, a vocation, how you are going to pay your rent, the bills that are stacking up. Maybe you feel alone or lost. Or perhaps you are retired or an empty nester and your days and weeks are not quite as full as they used to be. And yet, even without the external pressures of provide, provide, provide, or perform, perform, perform; there still seems to be this uncomfortable kind of anxiety that seeps in as you contemplate the uncertainty of the future, will I have the care I need, will I be near family, am I going to be able to stay in my home?

This anxiety, this worry that we feel is real and present and sometimes we just long to hear good news.

Enter Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, his words which invite us to reframe all of this anxiety in light of God's unfolding story and to fully inhabit the present moment, instead of always living in an uncertain future.

You may or may not know, but for many people throughout history the Sermon on the Mount is considered to be the epitome of Jesus' teaching. It contains all the classic lines, all that tweetable moments, like Judge not lest ye be judged, blessed are the pure at heart for they will see God, and of course do unto others as you would have them do unto you. There is a lot of really good stuff in here.

The scene is commonly pictured as this music festival kind of atmosphere with the poor, the weak, the vulnerable, coming out to this mountain side to hear hippie Jesus dispensing truth about the nature of God's kingdom.

In fact it is hard for me to hear this morning's scripture passage and not have this image come to mind. These verses conjure up beautiful everyday kind of imagery; flowers, birds, food and drink, and they point to this idyllic kind of life we think only exists on a commune somewhere up in Oregon, miles from our everyday life on the semi-urban paved streets of Santa Monica & West LA.

And so we think, maybe Jesus is just an idealist, maybe his words were intended for the earliest disciples who knew nothing of the internet, instant connectivity and being on demand 24/7, perhaps these words were never intended for workaholics, it could be that they were meant only for the monastic's who devoted themselves to a life of prayer.

Yet, the Sermon on the Mount as a whole is always pointing us to the kingdom of God. It lays out for us an active Christian ethic of love which embraces every human person as a beloved child of God; it makes huge demands on us like forgive ourselves and forgiving others, praying for our enemies, giving of ourselves for the sake of the healing of the world.

It invites us to shed the values of this world and to live fully into the values of God's kingdom. And Jesus says when we do this we will find the fullness of life, an abundant life, a life beyond imagining.

Therefore, I think this passage today invites us to reframe the narrative that we have inherited from our world, this narrative that undergirds so much of our society and our day to day life, and that narrative is a narrative of scarcity.

The narrative of scarcity goes something like this:

There isn't enough. No matter what you do or what you have it isn't enough.

This narrative of scarcity tends to thrive on the uncertainty of the future. It feeds on this ambiguity and always somehow, somehow makes us feel fearful of what is to come and more often than not it causes us to catastrophize.

You know what I mean by that right? Automatically imagining the worst of all possible future outcomes.

It's like you lose your wallet, you look around frantically for it for a few hours, after a few hours you determine that it's gone, and well that's it, someone's stolen your identity, drained your bank account, liquidated all your assets.

Or like that time back in high school, you got a 'C' in your calculus midterm and you thought, well that's it, game over, no college, no job, no friends, no family.

The narrative of scarcity reveals and exploits every little human flaw or imperfection because at the core of this narrative is the belief that we are supposed to be able to save ourselves, we can earn our salvation through our own ingenuity and

labor, and if we just keep working at it we will be perfect, our lives will be perfect. And the end result is a cycle of anxiety as you try harder and harder to control an uncertain future and you become more detached from the present. The picture that Jesus gives us today is a very different picture. Jesus reframes all of this, the anxiety and worry that we face about not having enough, not being enough, and his answer to it all is grace and gratitude. Jesus says you are a gift, your life is a gift, the breath that you just took is a gift, your home, your friends, your family a gift, this creation and all within it is a gift, all that is seen and unseen is a gift from God's overflowing, abundant, never-ending love and goodness. The narrative of the gospel, the narrative of the kingdom, is **there is always more than you can imagine, there is always more than enough, you don't have to do anything to earn it, it is given to you freely, a gift of grace.**

The narrative of God's kingdom thrives on living fully in the present moment, being anchored here and now, noticing all of the unforced movements of God's Holy Spirit at work in our lives and responding with gratitude and joy. This is an internal orientation, a state of mind, which has profound implications for how we live and how we inhabit this world.

It allows us to shed everything that is trying to stake a claim on us, everything trying to define us, all of that which is begging us to consume more and more to fill the void in our hearts, to calm and ease that anxiety and worry about the future.

To shed that which tells us that we can and will save ourselves if we just work hard enough and are perfect enough.

The gospel speaks a word of truth and love to us and says just breathe, just notice the beauty of each moment because we are alive, and God is with us. It allows us to come out of ourselves, out of the downward spiral of self-absorption which is anxiety and to be aware of the abiding love of God in each and every moment and to share in that love with thanksgiving.

Gratitude is a monumental task in the grips of worry and anxiety and it also doesn't lead to a sudden conversion. But, slowly, over time it melts your heart, it turns you away from the myth of scarcity to the abundance of God. Maybe this is why Jesus chose to use pretty common and ordinary examples, the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. They are not extraordinary or profound, but even these every day, common things contain the infinite mystery of God's grace, these simple, beautiful creations point to the goodness of our creator.

Anthony De Mello, a Jesuit theologian, once said, "you sanctify whatever you are grateful for." As you practice gratitude you start to cherish the things that you have instead of worrying about what you don't have. Your gratitude makes the people and material possessions in your life more precious, more cherished, more holy.

We sanctify whatever we are grateful for.

What are you grateful for today? What will you carry with you into this week? As you prepare for feasts of turkey, cranberries, pumpkin pies and sweet potatoes, what do you cherish, what is precious to you, what will you share around the table?

Think about it for a moment.

You make holy that which you are grateful for. It is a sign of God's grace and goodness made real in your life. It reveals the fundamental nature of our universe that there is a divine force of love and goodness that undergirds all of creation. That there is redemption and hope for us and all humanity, that God is with us in simple, elegant everyday kinds of things like flowers and birds and puppies and a child's laugh. That love is here, that love is present and that love will always have the last word.

This last week it seemed like our world was a little bit more anxious than usual in response to the horrific attacks in Paris, Beirut, Mali. The rhetoric ramped up as people wanted a simple answer and solution and the narrative of scarcity and fear dominated headlines.

In the midst of all that, a video went viral on Facebook of a young father named Antonie Leiris whose spouse was killed in the Paris attacks. The video is raw and real, a video of lament and grief, and the enduring power of love. He read a letter he penned to those who perpetrated the attack and in it he declares, "You will not have my hatred," and he goes on...

"There are only two of us, my son and I, but we are stronger than all the armies of the world. Moreover, I have no more time to grant you, I must go to Melvil who is waking up from his nap. He is just 17-months-old. He will eat his snack like he does every day, then we will play like we do every day and every day of his life this little boy will affront you by being happy and free. Because you will not have his hatred either."

As I listened I thought of the words printed on the front of our Order of Worship these past few weeks, the verse from John 15:10, you must go on living in my love. You **MUST** go on living in my love, and for the first time I heard those words through the lens of a grieving husband, an imperative from Jesus, a command to move forward as best we can, living fully in the present moment, and never giving into fear and hatred but going on in love with gratitude, joy and hope.

Thanks be to God. Amen.