

November 26, 2009

## **Thanksgiving Day**

Matthew 6:25-33

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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It was the tradition in my previous parish in NY, to prepare thanksgiving dinner for over 350 homebound and elderly persons in our neighborhood. These meals were delivered to their homes on Thanksgiving Day. Everyone in the parish was involved in some way. Children made beautiful Thanksgiving cards offering words of friendship and love. Some parishioners bought the turkeys, others volunteered to cook and prepare the meals, and still others brought in homemade desserts. Everything was planned out down to the last minute: the turkeys had to be cooked and cooled by Monday evening, when the volunteers would carve and debone each turkey. Tuesday evening all of the sides were made and the desserts were cut into individual servings. Wednesday evening the food was plated onto aluminum pans covered in foil with large print reheating instructions taped to the top. Thursday morning the deliveries were grouped by city block so that the volunteers could deliver several meals without having to travel too far. It truly was a wonderful event in which the entire parish participated. That is, until the Thanksgiving when I was in-charge of overseeing it.

I had been on the staff at this church for all of three weeks and this first big event was looming over my head. The volunteers were already signed-up, the turkeys had been bought, the names of recipients had been gathered, all systems were go until I got the news that our 15 year old industrial size oven had died. Apparently it had been limping along for quite a while and the week before Thanksgiving the oven finally decided that it had served its time. There was no way that we could order and install a new oven in time to get all of the 30+ turkeys cooked. Several parishioners offered to cook 2 turkeys in their homes, a couple more offered to play hooky from work on Monday to cook, but we still had about 15 turkeys to find ovens for. I pursued every far-fetched idea, but could not find ovens for these remaining turkeys. My anxiety was through the roof. Here I am a new priest, in a new job, with the first major project that I am charged with and try as I might; I couldn't find a solution to our problem. I tried to suppress my anxiety and focus, but the harder I tried to control the outcome, the more obvious it became that I had no control over this situation.

At the last minute, as we were facing the fact that we might have to tell half of the recipients that we would not be bringing Thanksgiving dinner to them this year, a friend of a parishioner offered to help. She worked for one of the cooking schools in NY. After hearing about our situation, the school offered to keep their building open on Monday afternoon so that we could use their industrial sized ovens to cook the remaining turkeys. I recognized God's hand at work in opening those doors to us. Relief and gratitude coursed through me and I felt all my anxieties

melting away. With a thankful heart I felt liberated, completely free to do the ministry I had been charged with.

Those meals on Thanksgiving Day weren't so much about keeping someone from going hungry. What this ministry was about was relationship. The parish wanted to reach-out to those members of the community who are frequently forgotten and neglected, to let them know that they were loved, that they were cared for, that they mattered. As this ministry developed over the years, powerful relationships were built between recipients and the parishioners who delivered the meals as they came together year after year on Thanksgiving Day. Some people had been delivering meals to the same recipients for years and they had become like family. In the end, all of the worry, all of the anxiety did very little to improve our situation. A door was opened, and God provided for this ministry.

Anxiety and worry is certainly not a 21<sup>st</sup> Century phenomenon. Feeling anxious seems to be a fairly common human trait. We hear in Matthew today, that anxiety was certainly a prominent emotion 2000 years ago, just as it dominates our lives now. Anxiety and worry can draw us into directions that make us less than who we were created to be. In our anxiety we begin to hoard our resources, circle the wagons, close the boundaries of our normal sphere of experience. We shut ourselves off, and perhaps even begin to shut-down out of fear. We are diminished in how we move and act in the world. And certainly are not living into the fullness of who we were created by God to be.

If this is our standard mode of operating in the world, carrying around anxiety and fear, then we are diminishing ourselves, diminishing who we could be. For many of us, our lives are certainly filled with stress that is beyond our control. But hopefully, despite that burden, we do experience moments of freedom, moments of grace when we feel those anxieties lift and the worry falls from around our shoulders. For me this happens each and every time we gather together around this altar and I am reminded of God's love for us. God's love calls us to be the fullness of who we were created to be. Jesus tells us in today's gospel no to be anxious, but to strive first for God's kingdom. God desires for us to live in a different way, to shed those anxieties and fears and instead trust in God's providence, in God's love for us. In our Eucharistic prayer, we are reminded that when we, as a people were lost in the world and were turning away from God to paths that diminished who we were God provided for us. God sent God's son into the world to redeem us, to offer us grace and love. In the Eucharistic feast we gather together, we give thanks to God, we break bread, and we receive God's love. In these ritual actions, we are reminded that we are beloved of God and that God will provide.

For our part, we are to trust in God, which means taking a new approach to our lives by setting aside our anxiety-ridden selves and instead approaching life with a spirit of thanksgiving. When the root of our actions stem from thanksgiving for God's forgiveness and love instead of from our own anxieties, then we are liberated. Our lives become transformed as we take on the fullness of who God

created us to be. We start acting in the world and responding to those around us with generosity and thanksgiving. So, do not worry. Set your anxieties aside, lay them down and trust in God's love and care for you. "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."