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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/25/2015, Thanksgiving Eve
Matthew 6:25-33
Be Not Anxious

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Jesus said] ²⁵Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? (Matthew 6:25, RSV)

Only God can give such a magnificent invitation! Only God, with his heart as big as the sky and his power without limitation, can invite us to be calm and to trust in him. Only God has the moral right to invite us toward the peace that his other creatures know – the birds of the air, the lilies of the field, and, say, the pet animal in your own home or in your memories of your childhood home.

Our cat, Nermal, for instance: he has his likes and his dislikes, but he doesn't seem to waste a moment worrying about them. He hates going to the vet, for example. He hates his cat carrier. He hates that strange sensation of descending in the elevator. He hates the taxi ride. He hates being examined by the doctor. There is not a thing he likes about going to the vet, and yet, he doesn't spend much time worrying about it. When we get him home, he stalks off in a huff for a little while, but then he comes back, starts purring again, and is soon his same old self again. He lets it go! He is not anxious about tomorrow. He seems to live according to the saying of Jesus in the very next verse after this evening's Gospel Lesson:

³⁴Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. (Matthew 6:34, KJV)

Yep, that seems to be Nermal's theory of things: He does not mean to rack himself with cares. He does not mean to "melt himself down with innumerable anxieties."¹ He will let tomorrow fend for itself, and meanwhile, he means to enjoy today.

Now, in this evening's Gospel Lesson, Jesus invites us to so craft ourselves that we develop the trust in him that the birds of the air and the lilies of the field have by their nature. It is not an impossible thing for us. Jesus is not asking us fly like the birds of the air. He is simply asking us to take no thought for tomorrow, like the birds and like the lilies and like Nermal.

Notice, Jesus does not say "Make no plans for tomorrow. Make no provisions for tomorrow." The birds and the squirrels and plenty of animals make provision

¹ A phrase from St. John Chrysostom's homilies on Matthew 6.

for tomorrow. But they do not seem to be anxious about tomorrow. They just calmly gather their acorns or feather their nests, or search for their caves in which to hibernate. They work with great energy at making what provisions they can, but they do not seem to work with anxiety. Energy, yes, but anxiety, no.

Patriarchs and saints of old seem to have accomplished this. It is not beyond human nature to be more calm about life. So, Abraham leaves his homeland and "...he went out, not knowing whither he went," as the Bible puts it (Hebrews 11:8, KJV). Abraham's example lies behind one of the great prayers of the church:

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us. (Evening Prayer, LBW)

This is what Jesus asks of us in this evening's Gospel Lesson, that we try to live each day before us being more mindful that God's hand is leading us and his love supporting us.

Think of the calm courage of Daniel in the lion's den or Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego when threatened by the burning fiery furnace (Daniel 3). They show no signs of anxiety, but only of faith in God.

Or think of how carefree St. Francis was when he took off his expensive tunic and gave it to the beggar – a symbol of his voluntary poverty on behalf of the poor.

Or think of Mother Teresa and of her quiet confidence as she faced overwhelming challenges and suffering in poor Calcutta.

Or best of all, think of Jesus himself – the One who calls to us to "be not anxious." I like his example because it is both more authoritative and more nuanced than others. He practiced his own preaching in that he was content to be a poor man with nowhere to lay his head, and he was fearless before the threat posed by King Herod, with his defiant saying,

And he said to them, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.'" (Luke 13:32, RSV)

And think of how calmly he speaks of his coming fate:

For he taught his disciples, and said unto them, The Son of man is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill him; and after that he is killed, he shall rise the third day. (Mark 9:31, KJV)

Finally, remember the character of the Fourth Petition of our Lord's Prayer – the way he asks us to pray for our “daily bread” – for what he need to make it through this day, leaving tomorrow's needs for tomorrow.

We can cherish the example of the sorrow and fear of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and his submission to the will of his heavenly Father. Clearly Jesus was troubled in spirit at his approaching death. St. Luke speaks of his agony of spirit:

And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground. (Luke 22:44, KJV)

But maybe this Gethsemane scene is the great illustration for us of being not anxious about tomorrow. In Gethsemane, Jesus was troubled by the danger right at hand. The temple guards were on their way to the Garden to arrest him. We get no picture of Jesus being anxious the week before about the cup that he must drink. Of course, we do not know the details of the inner life of Jesus. But what we do know is that in his great Sermon on the Mount, Jesus invites people to be more calm in life. Be not anxious about what we shall drink or eat or wear, for our heavenly Father knows that we have need of these things:

³³But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. (Matthew 6:33, RSV)

And so it is that we come to a central idea of our Lord's teaching about anxiety. Jesus wants us to lift our eyes up from the pressures of daily life and to remember that we have a heavenly Father and we have eternity before us. He wants us to wrestle our attention away from the incessant call of present circumstances, and to think instead “first of his kingdom and his righteousness.” That is, Jesus wants us to remember that there is more to life than these earthly pressures, and that we have a heavenly Father who has blessed us in the past and means to do so even more through eternity, when he will set all things right for us.

And so, if you can, try to take some encouragement from your own past. God has indeed provided for us in the past. I think many of us could give that good testimony. My wife, Carol, has been especially good at reminding me of this at various times throughout our marriage. There were times, I admit, when I was succumbing to anxiety about things. There were times when I wondered how in the world we were ever going to be able to send our boys to college. How were we going to be able to afford it? Things just did not seem to add up. But right in the midst of such uncertainties, Carol would quietly encourage me. She would say, “Things have been tight in the past, but God has seen us through.” And she was right. Of course, she was right! Look at all the blessings each of us has received right up to this present moment. If any of us is standing, it is because God has

been good to us. Earthly parents do not neglect their children. Even more our heavenly Father does not neglect us.

And sometimes, the blessings of God are quite evident and we have plain and practical reasons for thanksgiving. Nowadays I am thinking of our recently completed Slate Roof and Steeple Project. I mentioned in a parish email that you folks are the first congregation to approach our completed church, with the scaffolding entirely removed. We are the first congregation in this victorious, completed project, and I am filled with gratitude for where we stand now.

First off, we stand on the shoulders of our ancestors here at Immanuel – the first generation that founded our congregation back in the dark days of the Civil War – in 1863. Then we stand on the shoulders of that generation of German immigrants who built this church building in 1886 – that generation of workers, many of whom were blue collar workers living in tenement apartments, who sacrificed and sacrificed in order to build this beautiful church.

Then we stand on the shoulders of those intervening generations who never really dropped the ball, who kept this church going, kept proclaiming the Gospel in a world that needed faith and hope, kept forming Christian character in generations of Immanuel people.

Most recently we stand on the shoulders of our Roof Committee, architects, construction company, and all the workers who braved the heights and did their skillful work putting a new slate roof on our church, putting a new metal roof on our steeple, repairing stonework, re-pointing brick and stone, replacing our lightning rod, replacing our gutters and snow guards and downspouts, and did it all safely! I am grateful to God for their safety!

And finally, we stand on the shoulders of this generation of people here at Immanuel, for you kept our church alive during the uncertainties of construction. You contributed to the Roof Fund in addition to your regular tithes and offerings. You worshiped in the undercroft when the nave was off limits because of the work overhead. You worshiped when it was bitter cold and our boiler had died. You worshiped and hung in there during this past year of deliberations about the ELCA and the NALC. In my opinion, we have been through a lot during the past few years, and by God's grace, we are still standing, and, I hope, eager for going forward. I am! I am grateful for our past and eager to go forward.

And as we go forward, let us not be anxious. Let us note that great little pronoun – “you” – and apply it to ourselves. Take this promise of Jesus and grab it to your hearts as you go forward now into Advent, Christmas, the year of our Lord 2016, and all that the future holds:

²⁶Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? (Matthew 6:26, RSV)

Of course God loves the birds of the air and provides for them. But also he loves you! And he bids you to have some calm and peace going forward. His heart

is as big as the sky and his power is without limitation, and he directs it all toward you. And to him belongs the glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.