

It's all in our attitude

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson, Rector Emeritus, in the Episcopal Parish of Saint John the Evangelist, Hingham, Massachusetts on Thanksgiving Day, November 28, 2019.

Jesus said, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." John 6:35

Whenever I read what Jesus has to say, I try to place myself in the setting in which the narrative was written. When he says that he is the bread of life and that whoever comes to him will never be hungry and whoever believes in him will never be thirsty, we can't but help think of those who have a family to support with a mortgage and college loans to pay, the stress and strain of everyday life challenges our sense of trust that God will provide. What about those poor souls out on the streets of our cities and towns who are struggling to survive?

Thanksgiving is a time for reflection for what we have as well as for what we don't have. There is no point in regretting what we didn't do or never had. There is no point worrying about what lies in the future. We can't do anything about the past, but we can learn to live in the present knowing that if God has brought us this far, we can face the future with a reasonable sense of trust and confidence.

Nothing so troubles our inner spirit than to give in to worry and anxiety. Nothing so impairs our judgment than to live with a negative frame of mind. When things are going smoothly, the chronic worrier expects something to go wrong. When something does go awry, they derive a degree of satisfaction in being able to say, "I told you so." Those with a negative frame of mind expect people to let them down. As if that were not enough, their negative attitude brings those around them into their tension and anxiety. Sadly, they don't realize why they are so lonely.

It has been said that humanity is made up of two kinds of people: optimists and pessimists. The difference between them is that the optimist believes that this is the best of all possible worlds while the pessimist worries that this just might be true. William Inge, one time Dean of Saint Paul's Cathedral in London, wrote that, "Worry is interest paid on trouble before it falls due." Giving in to worry and anxiety captures and paralyzes the human spirit, directly affecting our overall wellbeing.

A wise person who had lived a long life said that he had known a great many troubles but he had to admit that most of them never actually happened. It is the anticipation of what might go wrong that produces anxiety. It is far better to have the confidence that we will be able to deal with a challenge once we confront it. The debilitating effects of anxiety and worry can predetermine failure and disappointment. Facing exams in school, interviewing for a job, raising a child with disabilities, and being responsible for an ailing spouse or aging parent can be stressful enough without giving in to the negative effects of worry and anxiety. When confronted with a daunting situation, taking the first step provides the momentum to get going.

Those of us who did not live through the Great Depression of the 1930's will never know the sense of desperation that so many experienced. With one fourth of the population out of work, many lost everything, their livelihood, their savings and even the homes in which they lived. There were those who remember not know where their next meal was coming while others recall strangers who came to their door asking for something to eat.

Not everyone suffered loss and deprivation. The experiences of my own family were a study in contrasts. My parents continued their lives without loss or interruption. My father was a newly

ordained priest in Southern Virginia and one of his parishes could not pay him, so they brought bushel baskets of food that they had grown. In contrast, my mother-in-law lived on a farm in South Carolina and they were left in desperate straits when they lost their farm that was the source of their livelihood. They, like many others, learned to be resourceful. For so many who lived through that tough time, they lived the rest of their lives being frugal and wondering if it all could happen again.

We have to be careful about making assumptions about the poor and homeless. No one wants the stress and strain of spending days and nights on the streets in subfreezing weather. Thankfully, there are places for those living on the streets to find food, clothing and shelter. One homeless person who found a place to stay told what it meant for him just to have a place to put his toothbrush.

Many great figures in history have overcome daunting obstacles. The English writer John Milton lost his sight, but was able to keep on with his writing. The German composer Ludwig Beethoven suffered a complete loss of hearing and yet would put his head to the orchestra floor to feel the vibrations of his music. The French artist August Renoir developed severe arthritis in his hands and when he could no longer hold a paintbrush, had it tied to his hands so that he could continue his painting. There are members of our armed forces who have lost an arm or leg but refuse to be hindered by their disabilities. Those who have been treated for the effects of PTSD are able to live productive lives. Taking charge of our life by refusing to give in to anxiety enables us to face any challenge and overcome any obstacle. Those who like to think of themselves as self-sufficient have to remember that self-sufficiency at times means being willing to ask for help when they need it.

On this Thanksgiving Day, instead of worrying about what you don't have, be thankful for what you do have. Instead of worrying about what might go wrong, be thankful for what is going right. Give thanks for not getting what you thought you had to have, but would not have been good for you. Give thanks for those grace filled moments when you were warned about making a wrong decision and were guided in the right direction. By living every moment with a true sense of gratitude there is no need to waste energy on worry, anxiety or fear. More valuable than anything else are those who love and care for you. If you feel the same way about them, say so. Tell them what they mean to you and give thanks to God for having them in your life.