

Matthew 6:19-21, 24-34

What Are You Striving For?

Trouble enough for today. Who of us cannot relate to that statement? It seems that quite regularly there is trouble enough and at times more trouble than we think we can handle in a day. There is trouble when a pandemic hits the entire globe. There is trouble when climate change brings sweeping changes to landscapes and livelihoods. There is trouble when people need to flee their countries because of conflict or food shortages. There is trouble when the colour of your skin affects how you walk in the world. There is trouble when you are homeless with nowhere to lay your head safely. Name your trouble.

Actually, do name your trouble, because there are the world-wide situations that we do need to pay attention to, but there are also the troubles that come to each of us in any given day, week, month, or year. Your trouble may be money, lack of time, illness, energy, or broken relationships. Right now, I have far too many family and friends that are fighting illness and most days I have to remember to breathe because my to-do list is longer than the hours in my day, and that doesn't include taking care of our home. Having said that, I will take my full-on list of to-dos against the financial struggles Ken and I have known.

The first year Ken and I arrived in Thunder Bay and bought our home, due to a number of circumstances in the last days of 2013, I remember having just over \$3.00 left in my pocket, our credit cards were maxed out, and there was no money in the bank, our children had been with us for Christmas and we were headed back to Alberta with our sons. I had promised that I would purchase the apple cider mix for the Wassail Service before leaving for Alberta, I hoped that when I went to the checkout I had enough money to cover my purchase – I did – but one never forgets the worry. My stipend cheque was just a day or so away, but in that moment, we were so broke.

Still, when I hear of people struggling with health, and lack of adequate housing or access to food, my heart sinks. My troubles have been temporary. Many that I know and love will not ever get well again. Or when I think of those I have met on our front steps of the church, I often wonder if I will see them again, or will they become one of the statistics of people that never found a way out of their circumstances. The challenges and people are as varied and compounded as you can imagine, or may know intimately yourself.

These challenges are not new, and to the people Jesus was speaking to on that day in what has come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount, we know that there were many challenges for adequate shelter, clothing, and food. Jesus also recognized that

people were struggling in their relationships and spoke about anger, adultery, divorce, taking oaths or as we might call making promises. He also spoke about emotional, mental, and spiritual darkness. He spoke about retaliation, love for enemies, prayer, and money. What people then and now face is usually not just one thing, but compounded and layered situations. Our money issues or serious illness can bring about anger and resentment. Being without food and struggling to keep a roof over one's head can bring about depression.

After all this teaching Jesus says, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" Well, ain't that just so helpful. He goes on to say how God clothes the lilies of the field and feeds the birds of the air. One might think this guy was just a little off his rocker. Who of us, or in Jesus' time would not be concerned for our well being and that of others?

Again, we need to reflect on this passage in the context of what Jesus has been saying. Jesus knows every struggle. God knows that we strive to make ends meet, to be a better parent, grandparent, or friend. God knows that we need to have food, shelter, and clothing, as well as healthy minds and bodies. God is concerned about all of this. So when Jesus says, 'Don't worry,' he is not asking you to be Polly Anna about your life.

What Jesus is saying here is that what we need to strive for above all else is a relationship with God, to loosen our grip on worry, fear, and our anxiety over it all. It is about trusting that you are not alone in your struggle. Writer, David Ewart sums this up with, "The opposite of worry/fear/anxiety is faith – or better still – trust. If we were to trust in God as simply and completely as the birds of the air and the flowers of the field do, we would not be anxious. We WOULD still have responsibilities but would not be anxious about them."¹

Most of this passage is about what we are striving for and where is our heart. In all of the struggles that people face in their lives the thing about the Christian faith is that we know where our hope comes from. Our hope is in God. It is not a hope that thinks that all things will be perfect if we just get it right or that we need to strive to make it on our own. It does not take away our responsibility to do the best in the circumstance we face, but we know that we are not alone. God knows our need and is working all things together for our good. (Romans 8:28) What we get from God is grace, peace, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is about looking for God in the moments of joy and challenge and choosing to trust. Again, Ewart writes, "Having our intentions aligned with God's desires plus trusting God frees us from being anxious / worried / fearful about what will happen next; allows us to let go of expectations."²

¹ Ewart, David. <https://www.holytextures.com/2011/02/matthew-6-24-34-year-a-epiphany-8-february-25-march-3-2-sermon.html> Accessed October 8, 2021.

² Ewart. Ibid.

And often it is our expectations that get in the way of living into the truth of who we are and God's love and compassion for us. We expect that life should go a certain way and when it doesn't, which is more often than not, we are disappointed, frustrated, and even angry. When we face unknowns in terms of our future, which again is always an unknown until it actually happens, we feel anxious and maybe even panic. Yet, we have been given the means by which to live the Christian life. As another faithful writer, Neil Chappell has said, the means are – "the grace of God, the peace of Christ, the gift of the Spirit. We need to have trust. To have faith. To have confidence."³

Life is filled with challenge, distractions, disruptions so living for God and in relationship with God is something that we need to strive for. We can strive for many things, a secure income, a good job, wonderful healthcare to be there for us, governments that are compassionate and just, but above all other things in our lives we might just want to make our most important striving a loving, trusting relationship with God.

One of my other go-to theologians is Scott Hoezee, he writes, "Jesus asks us to look at even our distractions, even our interruptions, through new eyes. If this is the context in which, somehow or another, we are able to seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness, then that kingdom and that holy way of living is possible not by our breaking *out of* the routine but smack *in the midst of* it all."⁴

New eyes for seeing every situation, every person, every experience. Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all these things, the peace of Christ, the grace of God, and the presence of the Holy Spirit will be given to you in order that you can live at peace with yourself and others, being confident that what you are facing you do not go through alone. Trusting that God's desire for you is goodness and believing that striving for relationship with God will give you eyes to see, ears to hear, and a mouth with which to speak new life into your own life and that of others.

On this Thanksgiving weekend, this Harvest Sunday, may our bounty be the love of God outpoured on us and on the world. Amen.

³ Chappell, Neil. <https://aweirdthing.wordpress.com/2011/02/20/dont-fuss-about-whats-on-the-table/> Accessed October 8, 2021.

⁴ Scott Hoezee. <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2014-12-15/matthew-624-34/> Accessed October 8, 2021.