

PROVIDENCE

TEXT Matthew 6:25-33

In the year 1635, the Puritan clergyman, Roger Williams, was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for promoting ideas of religious tolerance and for urging the separation of church and state. To escape deportation back to England, Williams made his way to Narragansett Bay, where he purchased land from the Native Americans who lived there. Together with a few friends he established a settlement that he named Providence, a naming that Williams said was in gratitude “for God’s merciful providence to me in my distress”. This settlement eventually became the capital of the colony of Rhode Island.

Williams gave that settlement a great name, for providence refers to the care and benevolent guidance of God. It comes from the same root word as “Provide” and “provisions”. In Williams’ day, providence was a word commonly used in speech, and our ancestors were not shy about attributing good things that happened to them to God’s care for them.

Fast forward to 1988, when Bobby McFarrin’s one hit wonder told us, “Don’t worry, be happy!” So, when I read today’s Gospel reading, I realized that Jesus is saying just that: “Don’t worry, be happy!” God, in God’s providence, will take care of us.

Bobby McFarrin says: In every life, we have some trouble. When you worry you make it double”. Roger Williams named the city he founded “Providence” in honor of “God’ merciful providence”, which he believed was responsible for revealing this haven for him and his followers to settle.

Today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew also tells us to “Don’t worry, be happy!” And it tells us why – God’s providence. The passage comes from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, and he begins by referring to the worry many people have about the future – about whether they will have enough of the essentials of life. Jesus confronts

that worry with three examples. First, he asks his audience to consider how God cares for the birds, which are individually creatures of lesser value than human beings. If God cares for them, will he not also care for humankind?

He tells us not to worry about food or drink. Inspiration for this was derived from observing the habits of birds. Birds do not worry, nor do they store up for the winter, yet they are cared for by their heavenly father. The image of God is particularly instructive at this point. God is the compassionate, good father caring for his birds, feeding them as they have need. In the same way, the life of the disciple is not lived in isolation but under the watchful care of a father who attends to their needs. In a harsh world that does not seem to care, this comes as good news.

Second, he challenges his listeners to think about how little worry can accomplish. It can't add even one hour to the worrier's lifespan. Third, Jesus points to the beauty with which God clothes the lilies of the field, which bloom only briefly. How much more will he clothe his people!

We are then told not to worry about what we will wear. Now for most of us this is not a problem. I suspect the text is not referring to a bulging wardrobe and the high-anxiety moment faced each morning when trying to decide appropriate attire for the day in colors that actually match. Rather, it is the basic need of clothing, which for many in the culture of first-century Palestine was a concern. Jesus' response is that the flowers of the field grow and bloom with ease and astonishing beauty. If this is true for mere flowers under the care of God, how much more will God take care of his people.

Jesus closes with a summary and concluding statement. The life of discipleship is characterized by a life that is singular in its pursuit of God. It does not mean that we will not (or should not) acquire possessions, wealth, or need food, clothing and other necessities. Rather, once one is devoted to God, one adopts the values, behaviors and priorities that God affirms. To live in accordance with God's reign – the Kingdom of God – means that as Christians we are a community within broader society that is aligned

with a different values system. We do not strive or worry endlessly about our needs. Rather, in entrusting our life to God, we look to our good heavenly father to provide them for us, as he does for all of His creation.

Jesus **is not** saying “the situation you face is not serious – think of the refugees”

Jesus **is not** saying “don’t come to me with your pathetic troubles. I have enough to handle.”

Jesus **is not** saying “I don’t care if you are suffering”.

Jesus is saying “Why worry –don’t you trust God will look after you?”

This is the time we celebrate Thanksgiving, the time of harvest, the time of plenty. But that has not always been so. And it still is not so for many people around the world. In addition to a life of terror, the Syrians will face a wheat harvest this year at 40% or less of pre-conflict levels. Imagine what that means for an average family. Quite apart from the fear of violence, their food intake will probably be half what it was before. They will always be hungry.

Here in America, and in much of the civilized world, we don’t worry about what we will eat. Our supermarkets are full and we have almost limitless choices of what we put on our tables. And the media keep bombarding us with images and messages from advertisers, and sometimes even friends and family, that encourage us to consume. These messages can make us feel unhappy with what we have in the hope that we will buy and consume more. The other side of this equation includes the harsh reality of economic failure. Media reports are filled with sad stories of homes being foreclosed, and financial tragedy striking both individuals and businesses. The heart-rending effects of poverty and homelessness still affect our society. We have constructed a world economy that is dependent upon the American consumer to keep it afloat. As a result, we live with conflicting messages and concerns that distract us and divide our loyalties. We seek security and stability and are appropriately worried about our future.

The current state of affairs causes a degree of angst when we read a passage like today's from Matthew. Of all Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, this is one of the more difficult sections to understand. Jesus' words seem out of step with our society and on the surface they lack coherence with the lives we are living. As Ulrich Luz has put it, when interpreted in a superficial manner, this statement could only have been written by a single guy living a carefree life on the beach in sunny Galilee.

So Jesus says "Don't worry". Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. It is easy to say, isn't it – "don't worry". But if you are like me you may be saying "but I do worry".

Some Bible readers have wondered if Jesus was saying that those who trust him should not make arrangements for their future. In fact, there are Christians who have made that assumption. But what Jesus is talking about was being careful about what monopolizes our lives and energy, about having our priorities in the wrong order. He said that we should "strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness", and all these necessities of life will come along as well. To say it differently, the more we recognize our dependence upon God as the giver and sustainer of life, the more we can be independent of anxiety about the future.

Unlike such notions as fate or luck, providence is understood as a positive and intentional working of goodness in life. We live our lives differently according to whether we see ourselves in the hand of God or in the hand of fate. Christianity does not claim that God always manages the minutiae of our lives, but it does say that at root, our lives are in God's hands. And the word for that is "providence".

Providence is a word that needs to be spoken more often today. Our society, though, places great stock in luck. We can see that in the proliferation of lotteries and casino gambling. Chance is a reality, but unlike providence that favors everyone, luck reserves its benefits for a favored few (the ones we see celebrating in the casino ads). Everybody else loses. Providence rejects that notion. God's goodness is for all.

Providence is sometimes used as another name for God, for you see, when we declare our faith in providence over luck, fate, astrology, and superstition, we are expressing our conviction that the agent behind the events in our lives is not the devil, not blind, uncaring fatalism, not even something called “the odds”. Rather we are declaring that we are in the hands of one who loves us, cares for us, guides us, provides for us, and never lets us go. In that way, Christ really is the answer, for he points us to God.

Providence. It's a great word and an adult perspective on life. Use the word. Live the faith. God is at work in his world and God will win. So: Don't worry. Be happy! Amen