

Thanksgiving Sunday – October 10, 2021

Life within Life – The Flow of Meaning

Thanksgiving Sunday it is! It is the weekend of Thanksgiving gatherings in our homes! The word thanks may not come from our lips many times, but a sense of un-measurable gratitude within us is making the time special for us. It is a time of relating to the family – those present and also communicating with those far away. It is a time of listening, sharing, holding up each other, encouraging, inspiring and much more. It is a wholesome experience of everything flowing, and you yourself being part of the flow – feeling lighter, feeling connected (not alone) and feeling more hopeful. When there is joy in the air, there is joy in you. And when there is joy in you, the same is in the air too. When hearts are open, there is movement, a flow that suggests unboundedness, abundance and beauty. I am sure you have asked, How do we make these special moments impact our everyday life. And that question is part of our longing to search for the Meaning of Life.

My theme for this Thanksgiving Sunday seeks to explore Life within Life, where we can experience the flow of meaning. In our Gospel reading, Jesus invites his hearers to watch the birds of air, and points out that their livelihood is not under threat. One problem in Jesus' observation is his statement that birds do not sow, harvest or store away in barns. It is true that birds don't actually do the exact things that human farmers do. However, that doesn't mean birds do nothing at all. They do go looking for food and water. So, what is the point Jesus is making here? What Jesus is pointing to is that they do not exhibit the same anxieties and the stress levels that humans do. Jesus's reference to birds would likely capture the imagination of his listeners who saw a bird as a symbol of freedom and also as a symbol of higher achievement and spiritual attainment. Birds had greater possibilities of survival because they could fly, spot food and water and go satisfy their hunger and thirst. Birds take what they need. They follow a pattern of taking, feeding themselves and their young ones, and contribute to their communal health. Birds become aggressive when they perceive their nests or young ones are under attack – a sure sign that they have a basic sense of caring about themselves and defending themselves.

If there is a pattern and meaning in the life of birds, what is it that is perhaps missing in us? Why are humans exhibiting anxiety? Maybe we tend to seek certainty before we get started, whereas birds just fly, and as they go they feed too. We tend to want to know the outcome in precise terms. We tend to measure who we are by what we can do or by our achievements. And Jesus gives the clear statement to value our lives and not food or our labours to acquire food. Let us not get Jesus wrong. He doesn't say food is not important. He asks the question in comparative terms - "Is not life more important than food?" The point here therefore is to look more seriously what life is, life that has purpose, meaning, that is

supported by relationships, that has the powers for compassion and making sacrifices. And this is what I refer to in my title, *Life Within Life*. Life is constantly unfolding, and it reveals purpose and meaning – which is what beauty is in a spiritual sense. When we call someone a beautiful soul, it is an expression of admiration of their character, maturity, grace, charisma – some of these, or all of these and more! Life is set within the unfathomable frame of Mystery that it is never fully comprehensible. We need music, voice, instruments, poetry, drama, dance, movements of the heart, etc. to express what life is. Can we say this is what Thanksgiving is? Thanksgiving is more than repeating the word Thanks many times. Rather it is Saying, singing and gesturing Yes, life is good, echoing the words of the Creation story writer of Genesis “God saw that it was good”. Abraham Heschel gave this piece of advice: **never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.** The ancient Roman philosophers, Cicero and Seneca, went further pointing out that the stability and strength of civilizations depended on people appreciating life deeply and entering every aspect of life with a deep sense of gratitude. When we don’t appreciate life, we are left with two options: One, we can become indifferent to life, and that makes us less passionate about life and less involved. The second option is that of heightened anxieties that make people want to destroy what they don’t like instead of looking for possibilities of transformation.

Next Jesus gets his audience’s upward look at the birds to lower down to a horizontal look at the lilies of the fields. There are silk lilies here in the sanctuary as part of the special Thanksgiving decorations. [You can see a shot online. Thanks to Liz Calam and anyone who worked on this]. Lilies in the ancient Greek culture stood for purity. Hence Jesus was bringing together something special in culture and spirituality. After asking the question, why do you worry about clothes, Jesus goes on to suggest what humans need to learn from the lilies. Having clothes is a need, having warm clothes in winter is an absolute need. Jesus is not talking against having clothes to wear. As a side note, Jesus does mention that unbelievers might run after material possessions like clothes. Maybe Jesus was aware of Eastern teachings which emphasized non-attachment, to get rid of our desires. Attachment is seen as the source of suffering, because we fail to possess what we desire, or fail in achieving our goals, or not getting the desired recognition. Denouncing attachment to the world might sound a world-negating philosophy. But Eastern thinkers try to explain how non-attachment works by pointing out that one engages with the world and doing good and helpful acts, but doing so without expecting any reward or recognition. One simply attends to the present, every moment, and doesn’t carry forward any guilt or misgivings of the past. And one doesn’t look to the future with one’s own desired expectations. These expectations are most likely to be limited in scope and hence detrimental to one’s well-being when one gets there. One of the famous Eastern thinkers in North America today, Deepak Chopra, explains it this way:

“Those who seek security in the exterior world chase it for a lifetime. By letting go of your attachment to the illusion of security, which is really an attachment to the known, you step into the field of all possibilities. This is where you will find true happiness, abundance, and fulfillment.”

In the final analysis we observe that even the Eastern focus on non-attachment we arrive at the many possibilities of life; we arrive at our theme of life within life. When we enter a journey of discovery, without clinging on to possessions, without seeking to control what we are in touch with, we see deeper aspects of life, and we allow meaning to flow, flow towards us and flow from us. Our minds find it difficult to be at rest, to find the quiet centre, to look at the world in fresh ways, or to be open to the Spirit’s leading.

And so Jesus gives the final word, as an instruction that carries its blessing with it. **Seek God’s kingdom first and God’s righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.** What this means is, moving from our self-interests to God’s love and justice – which open us to a living that is just and right. When we are part of a kinship based caring world, food and clothing are assured; and so also shelter. There is work to do, there would be hard work to do, there would be sacrifices to make. But all of these gain new meaning for us, because we are not takers, we are not motivated by a work towards something, we are not driven by a get that and keep it mentality. Rather we regard ourselves as people of covenant – we honour our indebtedness to each other, where mutual support and mutual service will make life lighter. We may not be able to fly higher as birds, which ability gives them greater chances of survival. But as covenant people, as kin-dom people we have set ourselves on a higher state of being. As the Apostle says in first Thessalonians, we pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances. This un-broken prayer and continuous thanksgiving are dynamic in that it is not one person or one leader saying “I have got your back”, or “I have got you covered”. It is a whole body, a whole community that says it and does it. And each one is a creative player. With all this promise and hope in place, we still need to be aware that there are growing edges for us all the time to go through. This again is our appreciation of life within life, and the flow of meaning. The poet Rumi gives us a sense of how we make this growth happen, **using the image of a guest house.** Every morning there is the **arrival of new guests.** The guests can come as a **joy, a depression, a meanness.** Some momentary awareness comes as an **unexpected visitor.** And Rumi advises: **Welcome and entertain them all. Be grateful for whoever comes, Because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.**

In a family home, in a church home, in a community service centre, we receive each one thankfully, because God is holding us in a bigger covenant together, and God is enabling growth, and assuring that our needs will be met adequately, fully. May God be with us in our Thanksgiving, and bless us in our Thanks-living. **Thanks be to God. Amen**