

Undoing Knots

A few years back when I went to visit my hometown in Brazil, I discovered that there is a cult to Mary there that prays or asks a certain Mary for help. It's inspired by a painting by a German painter in the 1700 (Johan George Melchior Schmidtner), and it shows Mary holding up a long rope with knots in it and angels helping her to untie the knots, and she is known as Mary the Undoer or Untier of Knots.

My protestant upbringing makes me a bit uncomfortable with a cult to Mary, but I cannot resist a good metaphor when I see one! So I wanted to think a bit about this divine image of God, untangling knots in a motherly way. I thought of mothers untangling hair, and shoelaces and untangling the lives of their children. And so while the Mary thing might not work for me, that image certainly does.

[Take out rope and tie knots into it]

Let's name all the things that caused us worry or anxiety this week and tie a knot in this rope for each one:

The state of Canada (elections, anti-Islam sentiment, immigration tampering...)

The state of the world (refugees...)

The state of our personal economy (credit card balance, mortgage, job searches...)

Fill in the blank.

If the rope without knots is my capacity to give thanks, then I feel like the rope with knots represents the obstacles to being truly thankful, they decrease it's utility or capacity.

[Get volunteer to undo the knots]

Most often when we think of thanksgiving, the list we conjure has something to do with all the wonderful blessings that we enjoy but have failed to name or acknowledge until this very special day: family, health, work, food, shelter, and so on.

That's all well and good, please don't hear me saying anything other than how important it is to be thankful. But it's good as long as you have those things and all is going well, so it is important to make a distinction.

The last time I preached here at Thanksgiving (in 2013) I worked at laying out the difference between Thanksgiving – which tends to be tied to circumstances – and Gratitude – which is grounded in our God-given living and being – for precisely this reason. I'm sure you all remember that sermon well, but I had to look it up! 😊¹

Today again, I definitely want to encourage us to be grateful for all the good things we are able to enjoy and not take anything for granted.

But I want to challenge us as well by looking a bit more closely at these passages of scripture from 1 Timothy and Matthew; we will take from each of them one strategy for untying these worry knots, and to move to a deeper sense of thanksgiving and gratitude.

Timothy

Our first bit of scripture comes from the letter to Timothy in Ephesus. Scholars don't always agree on who wrote the letter, though it is written in the style of Paul, sometime in the first century. There's a lot in this letter that can be helpful and a lot that can be troublesome for us in our context today (including so-called "household codes" on the roles of women and slaves).

The letter to Timothy, then, is filled with advice on how the church (the followers of Jesus) was to set itself apart from the prevailing culture and to guard itself against bad teaching. (Please feel free to draw any parallels with our current situation that occur to you!)

Ephesus -- where Timothy went to pick up this letter from the collective mailbox in his neighbourhood – was an economic hub, a multicultural context, full of influences from various religious traditions – which likely included women in various styles of head covering, I might add – but more importantly, that culture was plagued by something called emperor worship. It held that emperors were divinely appointed, or rather, divine, and it helped Roman leaders to maintain peace, security and prosperity throughout an ethnically diverse empire.

Here's a bit of an explanation from the Oxford Biblical Studies online² (paraphrased):

¹http://www.tumc.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=460:thanksgiving-sermon-by-mrr-oct-13-2013&catid=10:sermons-a-worship-audio&Itemid=58

² <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t94/e602>

The cult of Roman emperors (i.e. worshipping emperors living or dead), started out as a simple act of thankfulness for the peace and stability brought by Rome. It developed out of genuine gratitude for the benefits brought by Rome, and it was not felt to be a substitute for existing religions.

But as the feelings of gratitude faded, the imperial cult became more and more a test of loyalty to the regime. The consequence was that refusal to perform the outward rituals was bound to incur penalties. ... Christians suffered when the Church's numbers expanded sufficiently to attract the State's hostile attention (1 Pet. 4: 16).

Failure to give divine honours to the emperor or 'to swear by the genius of Caesar was not the only ground for persecution; but Christians at the time were definitely being persecuted for their perceived lack of civic sense and of their disloyalty to an empire from which they had derived many material benefits.

In that context, the writer of the letter to Timothy wanted to keep the budding Christian church safe and to find a happy balance between praying TO the emperor and praying FOR those in leadership and staying safe and out of trouble with the government.

This passage probably made it into our Thanksgiving lectionary because it talks about thanksgiving, but I found it amusing (on this Thanksgiving which is on the eve of a fraught election) that it specifically addresses praying for political leaders! I did not find that to be a coincidence.

I am of the opinion that we should definitely get out and vote and I am thankful for the privilege to that privilege. And I feel that the emphasis of this passage this morning which says that instead of tying ourselves in knots about the election, we should heed the advice in 1 Timothy.

*“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, **so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.** This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.... I desire, then, that in every place the people should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument.”*

Sometimes we think of prayer as a last resort, or an impractical response to huge problems, but prayer is of utmost importance because it is connected to God's work of salvation in the world.³ And by salving I mean the ongoing process towards wholeness and Shalom.

³ Believers Church Bible Commentary, 1&2 Timothy, Paul M. Zehr

Life has taught me that prayer and how it works is a mystery. I can tell you what it is not. It is not a vending machine, where you put in enough prayers, press the right buttons, have enough faith and “Boom!” the beautiful answer to prayer pops out exactly as requested. It’s not magical, it’s more like a process of changing our perspective.

Here are some forms of prayer that the 1 Tim passage names:

Supplications: requests, a statement of need (naming). Framing it in terms of what your need is.

Prayers: is also a place and a time of prayer addressed to God (opening); placing yourself in the way of the Spirit, in the presence of God.

Intercessions: petitions offered on behalf of another (relinquishing). You hold up someone else you love and care for and for whom you would like God’s attention.

Thanksgivings: “through thanksgiving God’s people reflect on the past and thank God for response to their prayers. God’s people pray with anticipation about the present and future, believing that a faithful God in the past will answer their contemporary prayers.” So thanksgiving is a building up on our experience that we have of God and God in the world.

What can we draw from this to untangle the knots we are in around our country’s elections and the state of Canadian society?

How might prayers of remembrance and thanksgiving change our perspective on the issues of today?

Timothy says that at least part of the political knot is untied through prayer

Matthew

So let’s turn to the second scripture passage.

Whereas in 1 Timothy we can find lots of advice – and I’ve chosen to highlight the advice about prayer -- in our next passage in Matthew 6 – also a part of the Thanksgiving lectionary readings – we find a prime example of Jesus as a wisdom teacher, which addresses some of the other knots in our rope. This sounds like something straight out of Proverbs.

“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

This is an unambiguous piece of wisdom coming from Jesus. We don't need a sermon about it to try to make it easier to swallow or to relativize it. Jesus, Wisdom, Sophia affirms that there is no dual ownership of our souls.

I find this to be one of the hardest parts about being a Jesus follower in today's world with our system of jobs, economy, retirement savings, bank loans, speculation, commodities, bankruptcies, bail outs, panhandling, debit cards and debt. We depend so much on these particular principalities and these powers that it is hard to fathom a different way of living in the world.

Consider the worry that money brings and the freedom that simplicity brings. Jesus was right, they are a tremendous source of our straining in different directions and tying ourselves into knots. Jesus was very clear in all his teachings that the realm of God is governed by a totally different set of values than the money economy.

To stress his point, Jesus turns to this lovely image of birds and wildflowers. This is traditionally understood to be all about Providence, God's protective care. I do not dispute that – it is about God's care. (As if to stress this I woke up this morning with a chorus going around in my head – “Know that God is Good.”)

This week, as I was sitting thinking about what to preach and the birds of the air, I heard a sharp noise and found out that a bird flew right into my window. Sadly, it did not survive. Another bird was the victim of our cat Antoine and his newly acquired hunting skills. Good for Antoine, not so good for the bird. Two bird encounters in a week that the scripture passage is about care for the birds... I learned that birds' lives are relatively carefree but they also incredibly vulnerable and incredibly short.

Jesus can be tricky with some of his examples, if we can get past the nice comfy reading.

I've also noticed in reflecting about the flowers of the field, that now that it is Autumn, the flowers are drying up, and the grass is no longer growing. I'm sure that this kind of thing happened to birds and flowers in Jesus' time too. Jesus knew very well what example he was picking in calling on the birds and flowers they are here today and gone tomorrow.

God is a loving God and does care for us, on God's terms, not ours. So maybe, besides telling us about God's providence and care, Jesus is also trying to teach us about detachment, and letting go of things.

Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?

But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will God not much more clothe you?

Therefore do not worry, but [above all] for the kingdom of God and [its] righteousness, and all these things [you worry about] will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.

So we untie the knot of worry by realizing that things don't matter as much as we think they do and yes, by trusting the God of the universe and by readjusting our priorities and our focus to the realm of God.

[bring back untangled string]

In a recent article in the Canadian Mennonite, our sister Susie Guenther Loewen reminded readers of a longstanding Mennonite tradition of “more-with-less theology” – articulated by Doris Janzen Longacre. The more-with-less books were a call to divest and simplify, just like Jesus is calling us to do in this passage. She reminds us that “economic patterns and systems help or hurt our response to God and all that is around us.”⁴

This is an understanding of discipleship (Susie calls it a Mennonite household code) that values doing justice, learning from the world, cherishing the natural order and nonconforming freely. It is a commitment to simplicity.

So this is my invitation to us for Thanksgiving:

As in Timothy's day, let our Christian commitment “subvert the wasteful and exploitive ways of our culture.” Let us pray for our political leaders and our political process, let us be grateful to live in peace, but not look to them as the source of that peace, but rather to God.

As in the Gospel of Matthew, let us release our grip on money and material possessions and remember God's realm where simplicity and trust are a way of being and the basis for our gratitude.

Let us remember God our sustainer and un-doer of knots.

Amen.

⁴ Cooking up Discipleship, Susie Guenther Loewen, Canadian Mennonite, Sep 28, 2015 (Vol 19, no. 19)