

So. Something has quickly and drastically changed in our country's psyche.

Our collective consciousness is at a vastly different place than it was even 3 weeks ago.

I have lots of evidence for this, but one way I know this is because I was reading commentaries and blog posts about this week's scripture, and some of them were written quite a while ago.

Some of them were written one, two, even three years ago, and suddenly their reflections on this passage seem terribly irrelevant.

Here are some of the phrases from these dated reflections...

"Live without anxiety because God cares for you,"

"Freedom from anxiety comes only through prayerful, grateful acknowledgement of one's dependence on God."

And lastly, "We must take the cares that whirl around and around in our minds, that shift our focus off the nearness of Jesus and onto the nearness of trouble—we must take those cares and present them to God."

Now, I have a hunch that if I told you that you just need to quiet your heart and feel hopeful, and then everything would be alright, you'd all roll your eyes together, at me, in unison.

If I told you that you could easily get rid of your anxiety by being prayerful and grateful for your dependence on God, again, I imagine your reaction would, at best, be skeptical.

And if I told you that all you have to do is take the cares that whirl around in your mind and present them to God and they'd go away, you'd probably udder under your breath, "Oh, come on."

The truth is that these simple platitudes just aren't going to cut it, given our current political and social climate.

I know teachers who have students who are coming into their classes crying, afraid they'll never see them again.

I have a Muslim friend who won't wear a hijab for fear of being attacked or harassed.

And I don't blame her, as that happened to a Muslim woman just the other day on the red line, here in Boston!

I think a lot of those biblical scholars domesticated and watered down the text, to make it appealing for our modern-day sensibilities.

But maybe if we heard these words in a historical context, they'd be more relatable to our current reality.

The Apostle Paul wrote these words, after Jesus was crucified, and he was writing to a community of new Christians that was having trouble getting along.

Before the verses we heard, Paul tells us that the text was written for two women who were fighting.

He writes, *“I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.*

Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, [talking about his disciple, Timothy], help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers...” (Philippians 4: 2-3).

Then he goes into the verses that we just heard read.

So, Euodia and Syntyche weren't getting along and Paul writes these words of advice not only for them but for all the new Christians who were not seeing eye to eye.

It was probably written about 30 years after Jesus was killed, and while they may have found some healing from his crucifixion in that time, surely they were still trying to figure out how to be his faithful followers in the midst of threats on all sides, including in and amongst themselves.

And I didn't mention that Paul was writing this letter from prison, while waiting for his trial by the Romans, with the likely outcome being death.

Paul, even under those grim circumstances, was able to tell his people to always rejoice in the word, and to be gentle and to not worry about anything.

Well, it's Thanksgiving Sunday, in which we offer thanksgiving and gratitude for all that we have.

And if he could do that, then surely we can take a lesson from him about practicing gratitude, even in the most dire of situations.

Now, Paul isn't the only person to have a transformative experience while locked up, Nelson Mandela is also someone who spent some time in prison, 27 years to be exact.

And in regards to that experience, he said, *"As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison."*

I think that when we know that our freedoms, our rights, our liberties can be taken away from us, that's when we become infinitely more grateful for them.

Perhaps this is why Paul was able to say such hopeful words in the midst of despair, and why Mandela was able to let go of his resentment and embrace his freedom, because he knew what it was like to have it taken away.

This Thanksgiving, let us be grateful for our blessings because we know that they can be taken away, that nothing is guaranteed in this life.

The moment we begin to take them for granted, is the moment we begin to forget how blessed we are, is the moment we begin to forget how privileged we are compared to other people around the world,

The moment we begin to forget how good we have it, is the moment we begin to allow minor and petty grievances to infiltrate our thoughts and negatively influence our whole worldview.

Because the honest truth is that our thoughts affect our emotions, which affect our actions.

This is one reason why it's infuriating to me that when people disagree with something someone says, and their supporters defend them by saying, "Oh, it's just words."

Yes, but words aren't just words.

They are informed by our emotions, I think words are the stepping-stone between feelings and actions.

If you articulate something that is authentic to how you feel, then chances are that your thoughts are going to manifest themselves in changed behaviors.

As James Allen, author of *As a Man Thinketh*, once said "*You are today where your thoughts have brought you; you will be tomorrow where your thoughts take you.*"

It's easy for us to take things in our lives for granted.

Not only our family and friends and our health, but the seemingly small modern conveniences as well, like clean drinking water and indoor plumbing and reliable electricity and ibuprofen and safe streets to drive on and all those other things that we don't think about.

You think they're insignificant, then imagine your life without any of those things and you might suddenly realize how important they are.

But if we allow ourselves to forget about all these blessings, then we create room in our minds and memories for negative thoughts, for all that we don't have, for all that we wish we had.

Although we might have countless positive and affirming interactions with other people, we focus on the one nasty thing that person said to us.

We all do it, so I would invite you to use this Thanksgiving holiday as an opportunity to intentionally change your thought patterns.

If you find yourself focusing on something negative, notice it, and let it go, think about the situation as an opportunity rather than something depressing out of which no good can come.

If you find yourself getting worked up at the family dinner table on Thanksgiving because maybe you have dissenting opinions from your family members, take a deep breath and unclench your fists.

Think about how you might be able to work with the person across the table for the common good, and if you can't find any way to work with them, then recommit yourself to working for the common good, even for their sake.

Changing our thoughts changes our emotions, which changes our behaviors, AND it changes our health!

“Our thoughts and emotions are represented in the body as electrochemical reactions.

These chemicals are constantly floating around in our bodies and are stored in different places.

The research is clear that negative thoughts, and the associated harmful chemicals, have detrimental effects on our health.” (The Spiritual Exercise of Healthy Thinking, www.faithandhealthconnection.org.)

They can lead to increased stress and a compromised immune system, which can lead to a whole host of health problems.

So, practice gratitude and positive thinking if not for the love of God or humanity, then at least for your own physical and mental wellbeing.

So, here's the deal.

Paul was able to encourage his followers to continue to follow in the way of Jesus, of non-violence and love, even when he is sitting a jail cell, presumably waiting for his life to end.

And he is telling people to keep meeting, keep organizing, keep praying, keep worshipping, even in the face of dire threats to themselves, keep living into the teachings of a man who was killed for what he preached in word and in deed.

If Paul was able to do that, then surely we can continue to keep loving, keep listening, keep worshipping, keep praying, keep marching, keep singing and keep protesting, in the face of despair.

We can keep up this hope and persistence.

We can remain continually grateful for all that we have, and stay committed to securing those blessings for all people.

So this Thanksgiving, when you find yourself having negative thoughts, notice them, and let them go, and see what kind of positive thought fills their place.

For it is only through this stubbornly fierce optimism that we will change the world.

And I will leave you with the words that President Obama said to his daughters the morning after the recent presidential election,

“Societies and cultures are really complicated.... This is not mathematics; this is biology and chemistry.

These are living organisms, and it’s messy.

And your job as a citizen and as a decent human being is to constantly affirm and lift up and fight for treating people with kindness and respect and understanding.

And you should anticipate that at any given moment there’s going to be flare-ups of bigotry that you may have to confront, or may be inside you and you have to vanquish.

And it doesn’t stop... You don’t get into a fetal position about it.

You don’t start worrying about apocalypse.

You say, O.K., where are the places where I can push to keep it moving forward.”

Where are the places where you can push to keep moving forward?

Start with changing your thoughts, see how that changes your words and then your actions. Amen, and happy thanksgiving.