

Abraham Lincoln is credited with establishing the annual Thanksgiving holiday that we will celebrate this week.

But he shouldn't get credit for coming up with the idea.

Before he was president, it had previously been the custom of presidents and governors and other political leaders to declare a 'day of Thanksgiving' whenever the opportunity arose.

For example, George Washington twice declared days of national thanksgiving, and John Adams and James Madison established several such days as well.

Now, these holidays were often set aside to celebrate and enjoy a successful harvest, but they weren't always focused on food.

They were also used to give thanks for other things like the ending of a war or to celebrate Congress' recommendation to the states of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

These declarations were intended as reminders of the blessings this country and its citizens enjoyed as gifts from God, gifts that were easy to take for granted.

Just imagine if our government was able to declare a national day of thanksgiving each time we had something to collectively be grateful for?

Our nation is so divided right now that it might not feel like we could come to any kind of agreement as to whether something is worth celebrating, but the prospect of such a holiday might have the power to unify us, at least a little.

And what if, in our individual lives, we set aside time to celebrate every time we had something in our lives to be grateful for?

What if someone took a half day off work because their child got Principal's List and they had to celebrate?

What if someone took time to give thanks to God because their cancer is in remission?

What if we took time to celebrate the fact that we have heat and hot water and kitchens full of food and safe places to live?

We take time off for emergencies, when something bad happens.

What would our mindsets, our culture be like if we took time to pause and express thanks and gratitude each time, we experienced a great blessing in our lives?

I think it would change our minds towards positive thinking.

It would help us train ourselves to look for the good, and to celebrate it, and to cultivate it.

In the passage from the Gospel of Matthew that we heard this morning, the first thing we hear Jesus tell his disciples is, 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life' (6:25).

He says don't worry about your basic needs, what you will eat or drink, don't worry about your body or what you will wear.

Life is more than food, and your body is more than clothing.

Amen to that.

He tells us it's a waste of time to worry, and he lifts up nature as an example for us.

He says look, birds don't sow or reap or gather into barns, but God feeds them.

And he says look at the lilies of the field, they grow without toiling or spinning, and they're beautifully clothed, just look at their color and design, God takes care of all of that.

Now, I'll confess, this advice from Jesus is really hard for me to relate to.

You see, Jesus was an itinerant preacher which means that he relied on the hospitality of others.

He went from town to town and he ate and slept wherever people would take him in, same with his disciples.

The fact that he was able to do this and rely on the generosity of others without worrying is a testament to his faith in humanity.

I remember going on road trips with my family and I'd be worried that we would have to sleep in the car because none of the hotels would have any vacancy.

Jesus could trust that strangers would welcome him in to the privacy of their homes and I couldn't even trust that one of the countless highway hotels would come through for us.

But that's the thing, I worry, and I think we all do, some of us more than others.

My friend, reflecting on motherhood, said that she constantly worries.

Nobody told her that parenting is like having two more fulltime jobs, the first taking care of the child and the second is constantly worrying about them.

She said, when you first find out you're pregnant, first you worry that you'll have a miscarriage, and then you worry that your child will have a congenital heart defect or a chromosomal abnormality,

then you worry that something will happen during labor and delivery, then when the kid is born and it's healthy,

then you worry every day that you are going to do something to harm it or otherwise mess up this parenting gig.

Other people worry about other things, health, finances, jobs, aging parents, our worries are strung one right after the other like lights on a morbid Christmas tree.

But Jesus tells us not to worry about our basic needs because that diverts attention away from what the world really needs.

The world needs us to spread God's love and justice and we can't do that if we are worrying about things like food and clothing.

God needs us to participate in the greater good, in civics, in churches, in schools, in social service organizations.

God needs us to volunteer and help each other and collect clothing for others and advocate for those who are the most marginalized.

We have to trust that God will take care of our basic needs, so that we have the energy to co-create a better world with God.

We can't devote all our energy to worrying.

The other problem with worrying is that it causes us to worship the idol of scarcity, thinking there isn't enough.

We worry about our jobs because there aren't enough promotions or living-wage jobs to go around.

We worry about young people going to college and paying for it because there aren't enough spots at the good schools to go around and there's not enough money to cover tuition.

We worry about our homes because there's not enough money to maintain those either.

Whereas gratitude has us worship the God of abundance.

Choosing not to worry is actually a radical, subversive act.

Gratitude looks in the face of all the situations that are presented as shortages and says nope, I know there's still more than enough to go around.

Gratitude says, I am not going to worry about not getting mine because I know I will, and I will make sure that my neighbors get theirs too.

The powers that be depend on us living with a scarcity mentality, that's how our economy works.

We all have to fight for limited quantities of all the things, that's what drives competition and our economic engine.

And it keeps us divided and at odds with each other.

Scarcity, after all, creates fear, and fear creates devotion to those who will protect you, think "we have to keep them out because they're going to take our jobs."

Those in power at Jesus' time were so invested in the world of scarcity that abundance was downright frightening, even threatening.

But abundance produces freedom, and that's the world Jesus imagined for us and it's one of the reasons he was so threatening.

His story of the feeding of the five thousand with a few loaves of bread and fish is a classic example of his theology of abundance.

Focusing on abundance rather than scarcity forces our minds to look at the world in a more positive light.

Speaking of which, I saw a TedTalk recently on the power of positive thinking.

I know what you might be thinking, but please don't roll your eyes, hang in there with me.

The researcher told us what we all know, that the majority of information we receive from news outlets is not positive.

In fact, it's negative.

Most of it is about murder, corruption, political fighting, diseases, natural disasters, shootings, you get the idea.

Our brains are slowly conditioned to think that that's the accurate ratio of negative to positive in the world, when in reality, it isn't.

We know there's more good in the world than bad, but what they're finding is that it's not necessarily reality that shapes us, but the information we feed our brains, that shapes our reality.

Advertisers know this.

I was recently listening to a podcast about the art theft from the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum and one of the podcast's major sponsors is ADT home security systems.

They know their audience is sitting there listening to a show about goods being stolen, so we have been primed to think about purchasing a home security system.

But I digress, my point is that if we change the lens through which our brain views the world, that shapes our reality.

And if we can change the lens, we can change our happiness.

In other words: practice gratitude look for the good, and over a long period of time, you will be a happier person.

The presenter encouraged his audience to take up a gratitude challenge, which was to write down 3 things a day that they were grateful for, for 21 days, because it takes that long to form a new habit.

They have done this in controlled studies and at the end of the three weeks, people's brains start to retain a pattern of scanning the world not for the negative, but for the positive first.

He said that by journaling about what we are grateful for, it forces our mind to relive the experience.

And by doing these activities, we are training the brain like we train our bodies, to follow a formula for success and happiness which not only creates ripples of positivity, but a real revolution.

So as you go into this Thanksgiving holiday, I invite you to start a practice in which you intentionally take note of that which you are grateful for.

And may you have the presence of mind to celebrate the good, and not worry about the mundane,

so that you have the energy to help bring about God's kingdom on earth, the one in which there's more than enough to go around.

Amen.