

Matthew 6:25-33—November 21, 2021
(Thanksgiving Sunday)

SO NO ONE GOES WITHOUT

I thought that for my sermon message this Thanksgiving Sunday I would share a story with you. It fits in quite well with Jesus' words from his Sermon on the Mount.

“I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. . . . Strive first for the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

This story, which I will be sharing in the first person, is about an experience a man named Rusty Fischer had at a time when he was worried and anxious about his life. And unexpectedly, God sent someone to help him. It made for a pretty special Thanksgiving.

She was a horrible waitress. Never got anybody's order right. Always screwed up something on the customer's bill, sending them complaining to the manager.

There were stains all over her gaudy pink uniform and runs in her stockings. Her bright-orange, Brillo-pad hair and pickle-like nose planted in the middle of her oval face made her look like that adorable Muppet, Fozzy Bear. Only our Fozzy wasn't quite so adorable.

On Thanksgiving night, when no one else wanted to work, only Fozzy and I manned the wait stations, serving molded turkey shavings and ice cream scoops of mashed potatoes to the clusters of senior citizens who stumbled in out of the brisk November cold.

Fozzy and I had never talked much, and that night was no exception. As Christmas carols blasted out of the diner's Muzak system, Fozzy hummed along, off-key, all night. Although I tried to share her enthusiasm, I had too much on my mind to really be cheerful.

My college tuition was due, and I was hard-pressed for cash. My father's business was in disarray, and he was considering filing for bankruptcy. After my parents' divorce, my mother had moved to an oceanfront condominium that was way beyond her means, which she later had to put up for sale. In the entire year it had been on the market, however, not one person had made an offer.

My life felt out of control, and I had no one to turn to. Given their financial difficulties, how could I possibly remind my parents of their long-standing offer to help pay for my college tuition?

I'd been slaving away at the diner for nearly a year, trying to save up enough for my first semester at the local state university, and I had finally reached my goal. Then, just that morning, my car had refused to start. The mechanic had said that the entire electrical system was faulty and that it would cost more than \$500 to fix it.

"Five hundred dollars?" I heard someone say. I blinked my eyes and stared into Fozzy's solemn face. And just when you were so close to starting college, too. Not a very happy Thanksgiving, is it?"

Had I really just admitted all of my troubles out loud? Had Fozzy actually listened?

Strange as it seemed, there we were, nestled quietly over two cups of mud-like diner coffee, killing time while the last few customers of the evening wandered out into the miserable cold.

"Sorry," I said, feeling guilt and shame for having negatively judged Fozzy. "I didn't mean to go on like that. Thank you for listening."

"Well now," she sighed, "it sounds to me like not much listening has been going on in your family these days, with everybody rushing around with their own problems. Sometimes a friendly ear can change the way you think about things."

She was right. Pouring out my troubles, things I hadn't even told my best friends, had left me feeling like I'd just had a restful night's sleep.

"Listen," she said later as we clocked out, "I've been trying to sell my old car for weeks. It's in good shape. It's not exactly a babe magnet, but I'm only asking three hundred for it. That's less than it would take to fix your car. Maybe the money you'd save would round out what you need for tuition."

"And then some," I gasped, leaping at the offer like a little kid.

We sat quietly on the way to her apartment, the only two on the bus. Everyone else was probably busy celebrating the holiday with family and friends. I thought of my mom, attending a gala Thanksgiving dinner party at the country club, despite her having to borrow money from my grandmother to pay for the ticket. I thought of my dad, working double-time at his company, trying to straighten things out. Neither of them had bothered to ask me what I would be doing for the holiday.

Fozzy's car was an eight-year-old Honda, with a little rust and nearly new tires. The paint was faded and the interior was worn, but the engine turned over in an instant and purred like a kitten. The car had more than 100,000 miles on it, but it was in better shape than the car I had been planning to fix. I couldn't believe my good luck.

"The paperwork is upstairs," said Fozzy. "I won't keep you long. I'm sure you have big plans for the night."

"Yeah, right," I thought.

I watched sadly as Fozzy slowly waddled away from me. Following behind her, I noticed for the first time that she favored one leg, and the soles of her cheap shoes looked old and worn. The halls of her building were dark and quiet, and I picked up enough clues to determine that Fozzy wasn't exactly walking into a festive apartment, either.

Fozzy's smile filled the corridor as she opened the door and welcomed me in. While she fumbled through a desk for the car's paperwork, I sat on a threadbare couch and looked around her modest one-bedroom apartment.

The room was clean and cozy, and the table was set with a paper tablecloth featuring turkeys and pilgrims. Turkey candles and pilgrim salt shakers rounded out her festive holiday decorations.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said, noticing that the table had been set for two. "I didn't realize you were expecting company."

Fozzy smiled sadly, looking at her feeble attempt to bring the holiday into her home.

"Oh no. That's just habit. Ever since my husband died six years ago, I can't stand to see a table set for one. I just have two plates so people don't go feeling sorry for me. I don't even know why I bothered this year," she said.

While Fozzy signed the title, I looked around the room at her shabby furniture and homemade curtains. Scattered about were photographs of several young men and women in various celebratory poses; graduations, birthdays, Christmas. There were also photos of a younger version of Fozzy, smiling proudly.

"Where were her children this holiday night?" I wondered.

Just then my stomach rumbled. I'd been too upset all night to even think about food, but suddenly I was starving.

“Listen,” I said, pulling out the wad of ones and fives I had earned during my shift at the diner. “I had a pretty good night. Why don’t we order some take-out, so your nice table here doesn’t go to waste. My treat. It’s the least I can do to thank you for bailing me out like this.”

Fozzy couldn’t pick up the phone fast enough. “Do you like Chinese?”

Later, as Fozzy showed off the interior of the car and its impressive features, most of which no longer worked, I noticed the numerous stains on her threadbare uniform. I felt an aching in my heart. Her kind, generous gesture had afforded me the opportunity to start college on time.

Classes would start soon, I would move away from home, and once settled, find a job on campus and start the process of financial aid and student loans. My long, hard nights of dishing out buttered carrots and creamed spinach were nearing an end. I wondered how many long, hard years Fozzy would have to work before she could finally retire.

As I drove away in my new used car toward a brighter future made possible by the kind act of a near stranger, I ran over a bump and the faulty glove box fell open. Inside I spotted a thin envelope, which I opened and read at a stoplight. Once I finished reading it, I had to pull over until my tears stopped and I could see the road again.

“Thank you for the first Thanksgiving I’ve celebrated in six years,” said a quickly scrawled note on a scrap of paper. “This isn’t much, just the tips I made tonight. Maybe you can buy one of your text books on me. Thanks again, Mavis.”

Mavis, I thought as I pulled back onto the road. All those nights of us working together, and it had been there on her nametag the whole time—if I’d bothered to look.

Mavis.

I counted the money in the envelope. There was enough for not just one, but two text books. There was also enough for a brand new uniform for Mavis. I couldn’t wait to give it to her.

“I tell you,” Jesus said, “do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. . . . Strive first for the Kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

And let’s not misunderstand those words. Jesus wasn’t talking about God making things we desperately need magically appear out of thin air, as though God was a magic genie who comes at our beck and call and gives us what we ask.

When we strive first for the Kingdom of God, it means living as citizens of God's Kingdom. And citizens of God's Kingdom love, provide and care for others in need, the way Mavis did for Rusty Fischer, and Rusty Fischer did for Mavis.

It wasn't magic or luck or good fortune that provided Rusty with a much needed car and Mavis with a much wanted friend and dinner guest. It was love.

But maybe love itself is one of God's greatest miracles, if we just had eyes of faith to see it that way.

If we could manage to genuinely love one another and live as citizens of God's kingdom, making that the most important priority in our lives, we would never have to worry about tomorrow, what we will eat, what we will drink or what we will wear.

Because all those things would be given to us. We would give them to each other, and no one would go without.

Now that's something we could really be thankful about.

Have a happy and blessed Thanksgiving, my friends. Amen.