

## Worrisome Times

We know it as the Sermon on the Mount. In three chapters of the Gospel According to Matthew, we have the evangelist's recollection of the core teachings of Jesus. It is likely that Jesus preached on these themes many times, so that his points and the illustrations he used were remembered by his disciples. It may be that what we have here is a compilation, as sort of "Jesus' Greatest Hits," rather than an actual sermon, preached exactly in this way on one occasion. But whether Jesus delivered all of this to one crowd on the same day or whether bits and pieces constantly recurred in his teaching, there is no doubt that what we find here in Matthew represents ideas that Jesus was most intent on getting across to his listeners.

We might call these teachings "The Jesus Manifesto." In grappling with what Jesus is teaching here we find the keys to living out what Jesus himself was to call the two greatest Commandments: to love God with all of our hearts and souls and minds and strength and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. As we have already heard in the past weeks, Jesus begins by pointing out the way to true happiness: being humble before God, being concerned about the welfare of others and about the evil in our own lives, pursuing the will of God as if it were our only food and drink, being merciful and making peace. Jesus lays squarely upon those of us who would follow him our duty to be the catalysts in changing the world, moving it toward living out the love of God. Living in love, Jesus taught, was more important than minute adherence to rules. Living in love enables us to control destructive passions and to honor others, not simply seeing them as objects for our use. We must even learn to love our enemies, Jesus said, so that we can resist evil without falling into the ancient cycle of revenge.

Our passage this morning comes as part of Jesus' teaching on how to pursue this new understanding of righteousness. Not only must we learn different ways of coping with what the Law has prohibited – violence against our brothers and sisters, sexual violence, the abandonment of relationships, false promises, revenge – but we must also learn a new approach to that which the Law commends – giving to those in need, prayers to God and fasting. We will look at the earlier part of this passage again next week but I think it is appropriate to summarize Jesus' teachings in Matthew 6:1-18 as a warning against performing acts that should be done out of devotion to God as ways of attracting the attention and approbation of other people. Almsgiving, prayer and fasting are to be done in pursuit of our relationship with God, not to impress our neighbors. And, on the subject of impressing neighbors, as we might paraphrase Jesus, don't be overly concerned with "stuff." That might be how the world judges success but it's certainly not how God judges.

And so, we come to our passage this morning; some of the best-known words of Jesus, I think. Our pew Bibles break these verses into two sections, one headed "Serving Two Masters" and the other "Do Not Worry," but for once I'm inclined to agree with the editors of the lectionary. These verses are all of a piece and they address one of the most pernicious evils of our times: worry about money.

Perhaps you are surprised to hear me describe worry about money as an evil. After all, we are still in the throes of an international recession. To be worried about money seems like prudence, not evil. After all, we all want to be sure that we have enough to sustain us in our retirement or to get our kids through college or to buy a house or simply to pay rent and buy groceries and

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medicine. In these worrisome times, worrying about personal finances or the finances of the institutions we cherish is a virtue, isn't it?

The problem is that the virtue of thrift or the wisdom of fiscal planning can rapidly turn into a sinful state of worry if we are not very careful. You see, if we become obsessed with worry over money, if we make all our decisions based on the bottom line rather than on spiritual concerns, then we have taken God off the throne of our lives and placed something else there – that dark and tricky thing that Jesus called “mammon.”

That's an odd word, isn't it? I'll bet that many of you remember that for years we read translations of verse 24 that said, “You cannot serve God and mammon.” In our NRSV, it's translated as “wealth,” and that's a perfectly acceptable translation. But that word, “mammon,” has deeper layers. Yes, it means wealth and it's the Greek transliteration of a word from the Aramaic language that Jesus and his contemporaries spoke. It meant wealth or treasure or simply money. But the root of the word comes from an older Aramaic word yet that meant, “That which can be trusted.” In times much older than Jesus, when the barter economy in the Middle East changed over to a money economy, people had to be convinced that buying and selling with money was just as safe as the familiar barter of x number of hours of work for a chicken, or so many bolts of homespun cloth for a cow. Money was “that which can be trusted.”

But it's a funny thing about money, says Jesus. It's easy to steal, for one thing, so you have to spend time and energy deciding how to keep it safe. And, as Jesus makes clear in some of his parables, the more you have of it, the more you want. One never seems to have quite enough money. In the Gospel According to Luke, Jesus calls it, “untrustworthy mammon” – you can't really trust this thing you are supposed to trust, in other words.

And yet, over the centuries since Jesus taught, human beings have continued to put their trust in money, serving mammon when instead they should have been serving God. I've done it myself. When Connie and I found out that she was expecting our third child (that's you, Sean), I was working in a job that in many ways represented a fulfillment of what I thought God was calling me to do with my life. I was working for the A. D. Players in Houston, a professional theatre company with a Christian worldview and mission. I was Administrative Director or Chief Operating Officer for the company – all administrative decisions came across my desk and I oversaw accounting, box office, booking, fundraising, marketing and public relations. In that role, I was successful in turning around a deepening deficit and getting the company back on track financially. I was also Assistant Artistic Director, second only to the founder as a voice on artistic matters and so I oversaw the literary and production departments as well as our Studio, which ran a busy schedule of classes for all ages. In this aspect of my job, I was able to convince the Artistic Director to expand our programming in a way that both stretched our company artistically and paid off at the box office. I was acting and directing and teaching. It wasn't paradise – it was hard work and there were some difficult issues to deal with. But the prospect of trying to raise three children when my half of our joint income was so low was the final straw. I got scared and started looking elsewhere for work. I wasn't able to get my worry about money off the throne and let God be in God's rightful place. And so, I ended up at Stage One: The Louisville Children's Theatre. It was a fine institution but I'd taken the job for the wrong

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reasons and my heart wasn't in it. Within three years, I was burned out and looking to God for answers that God had, in fact, already given me.

It happened to me again when I left Taproot Theatre Company. I think most of you know that I was managing director there for almost three years. Again, I felt like I was right where God wanted me to be when I was there. Again, it was hard work but very worthwhile. My motivations for leaving Taproot were different and, I think, better than when I left A. D. Players. It was during the recession of 2001-2002 and we had to cut the budget. Personnel was the only place left to cut. It was either me or three other administrative staffers or a program that served kids. I offered for it to be me and Scott Nolte, the founder of the company, reluctantly agreed. I don't have any regrets about that. What I do regret is what happened after. Rather than waiting on the Lord to put me where I was supposed to be, I panicked and accepted another job based on monetary concerns; based, frankly, on fear. It was two miserable years for us in Evansville and I thank God that the Spirit moved me to start the process of changing careers for the pastorate just as you all were looking for a pastor. In the six years we have worked together, my family and I have been richly blessed. I don't know what might have happened had I blocked out the voice of mammon screaming in my head and listened instead for God but I'm sure that God would have blessed the Boyers and Good Shepherd Baptist whether together or separately.

Now, I'm not telling you these stories to gain your sympathy or your admiration or anything of the sort. I'm telling you this to say to you all, "I understand." I understand what it is like to worry about money. I understand what it's like to allow the spirit of scarcity drown out the Spirit of God. I understand and I say to you, it does not work. Prudence is a virtue. Planning is wise. But if we let our prudence or our plans or fear of scarcity rule our lives instead of listening carefully for the will of God and seeking first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, then we have fallen from the way of Jesus. And getting back up can be hard.

I don't know about you, but I worry about other things, too. I worry about whether I'm giving people the right advice, I worry about whether I'm effectively communicating what God's putting on my heart – I'm worried about that right now, in fact. I worry about all the things my kids face as they grow up. I worry that my peculiar personality quirks will ultimately push away people that I care about. I'm a worrier. But Jesus reminds me not to get caught up in this trap. If I seek the kingdom, if I hunger and thirst after righteousness, then these things will work themselves out. Ultimately, God, the loving Creator of All, is in charge and cares and has a plan for me and for all of us. As long as I do what I know how to do, listening for the voice of God rather than allowing the voices of fear to drown out the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit, then all shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well. That's what Julian of Norwich said. "It'll all be OK in the end; if it isn't OK, it isn't the end" – that's what Connie Boyer says. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" – that's the old King James Version of what Jesus said. "Today's trouble is enough for today."

I do think I'm worrying less as I get older. I hope someday to be as wise as the lilies of the field and the birds of the air – and that's not the same as being bird-brained. They don't worry – the flowers and the birds – they simply are. At some deep level, they feel the love of God. Even in the bleak midwinter, to borrow a phrase, all creation gives witness to God's love. There is a wise Christian man whose work and thought I have been late to come to appreciate who has

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written a lovely reminder of this. He is the Kentucky farmer and poet, Wendell Berry, and in his poem, "The Peace of Wild Things," he writes this:

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

I am comforted that even a wise man like Wendell Berry still struggles against anxiety. Surely, we all do at some level. One of the great men of faith of the Fourth Century was the hermit, Makarios of Egypt, who founded a still-continuing monastery and is recognized as a saint by both Catholic and Orthodox Christians. Makarios wrote, "I am convinced that not even the apostles, although filled with the Holy Spirit, were therefore completely free from anxiety... Contrary to the stupid view expressed by some, the advent of grace does not mean the immediate deliverance from anxiety." There is hope for us yet, friends.

It is true that in the eyes of the world we live in worrisome times. The world's financial economy is sick. It is not working well and some of us would say that there is sickness at its root, where decisions are made for the sake of capital gains and not for the sake of true gains in human welfare. But God's economy is different. God's economy is not based on untrustworthy mammon but on that which we can trust, on that upon which we can put our faith – the love of God. The world's financial wealth may be a pie which needs to be sliced differently but God's love is a pie that just grows and grows to accommodate us all. If you are a parent, you know the reality of this. You did not start with a fixed amount of love in your heart which then had to be divided carefully between your children, each one receiving less as the next one came along. Instead, we love our children with a love that grows and grows. This is how it is with God. We are of more value to God than the birds but we are of equal value to God with each other. The fact that some of us are blessed in some way and others of us in another doesn't mean that God loves one more. It just means that God has different plans for us. At the center of those plans, all of them, is love.

So, take heart, my friends. We are children of the Heavenly Father. As we press forward in our lives, as individuals and as the Body of Christ in this place, let us be sure to encourage each other. Let us remind each other to listen, not to the panicky voices of mammon and of scarcity but instead to the still, small voice of the Spirit of God. Let us watch the birds and, if they ever come up, the flowers. Let us learn from the peace of wild things. And let us put our faith in promise of Jesus, who said, "seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you." Alleluia. Amen.