

“Worried?”

Matthew 6:24-34

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Brentwood First Presbyterian

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Introduction

We preach the lectionary in this church. That is, we preach the scripture assigned about 20 years ago by a group of ministers representing all the Christian faith traditions. For each Sunday on a three year cycle a team selected a reading from the OT, a Psalm, a letter usually from Apostle Paul, and of course, one of the Gospels. Today's Gospel reading is from Matthew, a segment of Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. This sermon stretches over 3 chapters in Matthew's Gospel, chapters 5, 6, and 7. Today's lesson is at the end of chapter 6, nestled between the bookends of Jesus' advise to store up treasure in heaven on one end, and Jesus' admonishment that we should not judge the speck in the eye of others because of what he calls the log in our own eyes.

So it is with caution that I prepared today's message. Most pastors do not want their congregation members to feel squirmy about anything. Most pastors want to affirm their members' previously cherished values. But today's lesson does not affirm our values. Today's lesson is like an unexpected splash of cold water. But you know what, Jesus was always doing that. He was always shaking people up. Today he shakes us up. He takes us out of our comfort zones. He tells us about our misplaced values.

First movement

Jesus tells us today that a servant cannot serve two masters, for he or she will love the one and hate the other. A servant must choose. Then he says we cannot serve both God and mammon. The NRSV translates the Aramaic word mammon as wealth, and some translate it as money, but most scholars think by mammon, Jesus means property, or material things, including money but not just money. Why did the Greek writers of the NT not translate the Aramaic word mammon? Perhaps to give it more force. Sort of like, “The almighty dollar.” But scholars do believe Jesus is saying material possessions are bad in themselves. They may be the good things God gives us. But even the poor can suffer misplaced values if they prize things they do not have, over the reign of God. It is not how much we possess that Jesus challenges, it is how much we treasure or value what we possess. It is not how much you possess that Jesus challenges, it is how much

you love or are devoted to what you possess. It is not how many possessions you have that Jesus is challenging, it is what you do with your possessions.

Yes, God gives us time on earth, material resources, and energy to focus on ourselves, or God. And the free will to choose who will be our focus. Because we have some degree of control, we must choose. Not choosing is still a choice.

I was thinking this week about what I really possess. You and I possess and have at least some control over really only three things: our time, our material resources, and our energy, don't we? Our time, money, and energy. And we live in a culture of rugged pioneer individualism. An individualism that is the American mantra. Something which makes Americans unique. A culture of "Me, myself, and I." A physician friend of mine went with his son to Circuit City recently and purchased the largest flat screen TV in stock. But when the delivery truck came, it was too big to fit through their double door! And as the commercial for huge HD flat screen TVs goes, "We want it all and we want it now." Yes, we control three things: our time, our money, and our energy. But scripture tells us we do not own them. We possess them. Because like a completed game of Monopoly, when we die, all the pieces go back in the box. We cannot carry our time, our money, or our energy with us. They all go back in the box. For we are but God's stewards for all these things.

Let me tell you a story of regret over bad choices. As an oncologist, I have talked to many folks on their death beds. And none of them ever said they wished they had spent **more energy on, more money on, or more time to** themselves. All of them said they wished they had given more of themselves to those in need. All of them said they wished they had given more of themselves to God. For there are no death bed atheists.

You might say, "But I want to leave my children and grandchildren an inheritance." One of my friends tells that her father told her that he is not going to leave her a single dime. But she views this as a kindness, not a meanness. He is not going to leave her money, because he says there is always someone smarter than her who can take it away. Instead, he is going to 1) teach her healthy habits so she will have a lot of energy and time, 2) provide her a good education so she will be a good steward of her energy and time, and 3) give her unconditional love so she can love someone besides herself.

Let me tell you the story of a couple who won the Kentucky lottery.

Do you think the wife's use of this Kentucky couple's windfall was a blessing to her or a curse? So it is with our money, time, and energy, when we spend them only on our families and not on the reign and commonwealth of God.

It is a sad comment on our culture when we say, "To God we give one hour a week. Mammon gets the rest!" The bewitching power of money and possessions.

Jesus tells us that though we say we have chosen to serve God, not mammon, but in our daily life, it is mammon that sets our priorities and determines our daily life. We would like to show a more bountiful eye toward the poor, but we cannot, because we need so much for ourselves. We plan to be more charitable in the future, but at the moment there are too many things we have to buy. We work overtime or at a second job rather than spend time with our children, because there is so much we want to get for them. It is not with our minds but with our lives that we put so much value on mammon.

Jesus tells us we cannot serve both God and possessions. That is, we cannot serve both the big picture and our individual needs. We cannot serve on the one hand God's reign, God's commonwealth, and on the other hand, our selfish needs. I believe Jesus is saying the selfish concern that prohibits sharing is the antithesis to sharing ourselves with God and the community of God.

But if we give our all to the church, who will pay **our** bills?

Second movement

We are afraid. We fear that there is not enough to go around. So we grasp our possessions and hold them close. We are afraid. We worry ourselves to death. Jesus provides an antidote for our fear. Can you see in your mind those fields of summer wild flowers? Colorful in their adornment. Energetic in their movement in the wind. When you step outside today, you will smell their fragrance. Yet we do not fertilize those flowers or even water them. God does. And all of us have seen flocks of geese flying in V formation overhead. They are as organized and majestic as can be. Yet we did not feed those geese or provide nesting spots for them. We did not teach them to fly. God does. God feeds the birds, God clothes the lilies, and God is in charge of time. How much more so does God feed and cloth **us**, and give **us** all the time we need?

The happiest people I have ever met are the Kekchi Indians of Guatemala. Let me tell you something about them. They do not live on Belle Meade Boulevard. They do not live in Brentwood. In fact, their villages do not even have electricity or running water or flush toilets. And all they have to eat is beans, rice, tortillas, and scrawny chickens. No ahi tuna sashimi is on their menu. No Chilean sea bass or T-bone entrée. No martini or fancy wine. And no key lime pie. Beans, rice, tortillas, and one piece of scrawny chicken leg or wing every day, one meal a day. And contaminated water from an open pond shared with animals. How do they cook their food? Over an open fire. They do not have game boys or cell phones. They have toys made out of sticks and stones. Can you imagine no television or internet? Transportation? All they have is their two feet. Work? There is none except raising corn for their families, and maintaining their thatch roof huts. Money, bank accounts, and credit cards? They have none. Absolutely none. Not even in a jar in the garden or under their sleeping mat. And yet, after 4 trips to the Peten region of Guatemala, I can with a little authority tell you they

are quicker to smile and laugh than anyone I have ever seen. Scripture tells us, and my trips to Guatemala confirm, we do not need money or credit cards to be happy. We do **not** need to be consumers.

Okay, maybe we can be more thrifty and consume fewer luxuries. But we still need to eat, we still need a roof over our heads, and clothing on our backs. And that is the point of Jesus' lesson. God will provide. God knows our personal needs, so we do not worry about our personal life, or tomorrow, because God will provide for our happiness.

We all worry about how God can provide for us when we put aside selfish concerns. How does God do it?

Third movement

Jesus tells us that when we strive for the reign of God, when we provide relief for tornado and hurricane victims, when we feed and clothe the homeless, we are not just taking care of the children of God, we are also taking care of ourselves. The Greek word that is usually translated Kingdom, is βασιλεια. But scholars think Kingdom is a poor translation for βασιλεια. A better translation is commonwealth, or reign, of God. Jesus tells us to seek first not our selfish concerns, but the reign and commonwealth of God.

Some of you may have seen the movie, "Pay it forward."

But besides the victimized, the sad, the sick, and the homeless, there is another group of people God is concerned about. In Matthew 25 Jesus tells us to be hospitable to strangers, and bring them also to Jesus. In Matthew 28, Jesus tells us clearly to go out into all the world, making disciples. Not just the nursing home, not just the soup kitchen, not just Guatemala, but also our neighborhood. When we try our hardest to connect with our entire community, that is, when we are hospitable to strangers, we are taking care of the children of God.

All the books say a church engaging God's Spirit is connected to its community. Connected to its community with Sunday morning worship, yes, but more than this. Let me give you an example. Brentwood First is deeply connected to the 10% of the Brentwood demographic that is over the age of 70. Connected with Sunday afternoon worship in a local nursing home, with Thursday afternoon Bible study at the Heritage, and with a grief support group that starts on June 3rd. We are also connected with the 30% of Brentwood that are Baby Boomers, with our weekly ballroom dance group on Tuesday nights.

We have in place something that programmatically appeals to 40% of Brentwood. Pardons to Martin Luther King, Jr, but I have a little dream. I have a dream of connecting with the remaining 60% of the Brentwood demographic. Those 30% who are under 20 years old, and those 30% who are their parents.

Surveys show half of the Brentwood demographic in the workforce are baby boomers, and half of them are parents of young children. This means half of the herd of cars that zoom past our church during rush hour are parents of young children.

Conclusion

How is our anxiety relieved? Jesus tells us to strive first for the reign of God and God's justice. Not for yourself and your family, but for God's commonwealth, because God will provide. In today's scripture, Jesus tells us it is time for all of us to come out of our comfort zones.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's children say...