

Two Masters

Psalm 131; Matthew 6:24-34

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Just a little earlier in the Matthew Gospel narrative is the phrase "*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*" It is one of the gems of the whole Biblical narrative – short and sweet and gentle enough to really get our attention.

Today, a few verses later, we heard "*No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.*" It is short and jarring, rather than short and sweet.

Last month I travelled to Montpelier, Vermont. I was one of the "former" ministers of Bethany United Church of Christ in that small town, and I was invited and wanted to participate in the bicentennial celebration for that congregation. It has been twenty years since I left that position of Assistant Minister there, yet someone in the church remembered and reminded me of an incident that happened early in my ministry.

We were hosting a small group of theological students for a few days. They were from what was then called West Germany and were touring the United States. One evening was simply a church pot luck dinner with a time afterwards for both questions and conversation. Some of the Vermonters were stuck on the fact that West Germany had what amounted to a federal tax for religion, as a small percentage of their taxes was automatically given for this. Their only choice in the matter was which church or sect would get their money. It went against the backbone of good Yankee independence and the separation of church and state.

The West Germans answered their questions and things generally were going well until one young visitor connected the dots. Realizing that the way of financially supporting our churches was very different over here, he asked pointedly and pointing at me, "How in the world can he preach the truth if you are paying his salary?"

It is a good question along the theme of "two masters." And it is an especially good question for a church where there is significant theological and political division. A preacher can't help but weigh the cost of the message to a particular group within a community as well as for the community as a whole. Avoiding conflict can be a pretty significant motivation.

Two masters. The commentary for these Biblical passages written by Kate Huey on our UCC website was helpful to me. Here are a few excerpts:

Reading the Gospels, we wrestle with the deepest truths about God, and ourselves, and the world around us. And in today's passage from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is going

right to the heart of the matter. In fact, just a few verses back, he observed that each one of us will find our own heart right next to wherever our treasure is. Then he talks about our vision, not our physical eyes but the ability of our heart to see, or perceive, what's real and true and worthy of our attention. As a Jewish wisdom teacher, Jesus valued the orientation of our heart, the very center of our being. But he also knew that our fears and anxiety could drive us to construct a sense of security – false as it may ultimately be – on the foundation of material possessions, fame, fortune, position, all the things the world around us considers important and valuable.

And she continues:

It's a challenge to re-visit our priorities regularly, since they often slip off-center, and after enough time and enough attention paid to other things, our spiritual orientation may wither next to more 'pressing,' but less important, concerns. What are the things that absorb most of your attention? What story would our bank statement, or checkbook, tell about our priorities? Does it speak more powerfully than the statements we make so easily in church or in earnest conversation about our spiritual lives? Does money have anything to do with our spiritual lives?

I'd like us to take a moment to center ourselves, to take a deep breath, and to close our eyes. Hear these questions as a guided prayer:

Where is the stress in your body?
How would you imagine it offered to God?

What is your mind stuck on?
How would you imagine it offered to God?

What are the dueling "masters" in your life that are claiming your attention?
How would you imagine them offered to God?

Imagine leaving this place at the close of worship with a new confidence in God.
How would you look moving away from this worship?

Breathe. Be centered. And when you are ready, open your eyes.

Jesus goes on to talk about not worrying so much. Sometimes it is hard for me to not go to Bobby McFerrin's "Don't Worry, Be Happy" and feel frustrated in the midst of a world where it simply isn't that easy.

In earlier translations the word for worry is anxiety. "*Don't be anxious,*" we are told. Biblical scholar Fred Craddock writes that the original Greek term means "split attention" or "divided concern." We all know how hard it is to keep our eye on too many things at one time, or to hold in tension two competing loyalties. Craddock goes on to write that this common feeling "*splits or divides a life between God and things, between persons and wealth, between love of others and greed. This is the distortion that dries up the*

springs of gratitude (no one can at the same time be grateful and greedy), closes the door of hospitality to strangers, refuses to open the purse before human need, trusts money rather than God with one's future, and learns too late the destructive force of greed's demand on marriage, family, and community.” (UCC website)

Split attention. Divided concern. Two masters.

In this particular instance Jesus is speaking about money, about possessions, and our attitude towards these things.

In this passage that is part of the extended Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is telling his listeners to look at and imagine, if need be, a world where God provides freely and lavishly, a world where anxiety plays no part, a world where worry is not a reality.

“Look at the birds of the air,” he says. “Consider the lilies of the field.”

Consider the following newspaper headlines:

- woman raped in parking lot
- shots fired from car at random targets
- stabbing ends neighbors' dispute
- three families homeless, arsonists blamed
- well known businessman peddles cocaine to minors
- baby hurled against wall...

“Don't worry, be happy?”

Responsibility and faithfulness mean that we have to live into and participate in the world, as fearful as it may be. Anxiety and anxiousness will be part of our experience. What is important, however, is in how we respond.

Does our security come from walls and fences that keep the “other” away? Addictions that keep the pain at bay? Money that is used to buy things that we are constantly told we need to make us happy? Possessions? Power? Beauty?

In the Psalm we heard, *“But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.”* It doesn't change the fact that we still have concerns, that we will at times be anxious, that we will struggle at times with two masters, and that we live in a world full of voices calling for our attention.

But, like weaned child – still full and satisfied – we are given hope and courage through God's promises and God's presence.

Earlier we asked these questions: Imagine leaving this place at the close of worship with a new confidence in God. How would you look moving away from this worship?

Imagine. Breathe. Live. And with God's help, make it so. Amen.

Psalm 131

O God, my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.

O Israel, hope in God
from this time on and for evermore.

Matthew 6:24-34

“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

“Therefore 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. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”