

Sermon Preached at St. Luke's Church

On

The 8th Sunday after Epiphany: Mark 6:24-34

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Once there was a church conducting its annual stewardship drive by canvassing every member door to door. Members of the Stewardship Committee visited the congregation in their homes to ask for their annual financial commitments. One of the visitors went to the home of the church's wealthiest member.

When the visitor arrived the member said, "I guess you think that I ought to be able to give \$50,000 to the church, because I am a very successful businessman. Look around. You can tell by the way I live. I am very affluent and I am a man of considerable means. But I bet there are some things you don't know. Did you know that my mother is in a very expensive nursing home? Did you know that my brother is disabled and unemployed? Did you know that my son is a missionary

and can barely support his family? Did you know that I have a granddaughter who must have very costly medication everyday?

The visitor responded sheepishly, “Why no, I had no idea.”

The man replied, “Well, since I don’t give a penny to any of them, why do you think I would give any money to the church?”

I thought the Finance Committee would appreciate that one.

Jesus says, “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.”

This morning’s Gospel reading from Matthew is found smack in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, this is the fifth Sunday in a row that our Gospel reading has been drawn from the Sermon on the Mount. Throughout, Matthew presents Jesus as the “Rabbi, the teacher. The context of these five Gospel readings begins by showing great crowds of people following Jesus from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, and Judea and from beyond the Jordan River. Jesus is pressed and hemmed in by the crowds and withdraws in order that he might teach his disciples. Matthew says, “When He sat down, the disciples came to him.”

Sitting down was the symbol of the Rabbi who was getting ready to teach, a phrase that is similar to our reference of a professor's chair at a college or university. The Sermon on the Mount is actually introduced with these words, "He opened his mouth and taught them." In the Greek translation that has very special significance. Matthew wanted to make it clear to us that we see the Sermon on the Mount as the summary or the essence of Jesus' teaching. He also wanted us to see ourselves gathered around Jesus as His disciples.

So, our Gospel lesson today is what is to be seen as the essence of Jesus teaching.

In the very first verse we find the word *Mammon*. Mammon is the Aramaic word for wealth and this word is kept in the Greek translation of the text because it personifies money and wealth as an evil master. In this passage we see the radical character of the teaching of Jesus on wealth and ownership beginning to emerge. Jesus teaches us that material possessions can become a false god that demands as much, if not more loyalty than God. In the next ten verses of the Gospel, Jesus expands his radical teaching on wealth, possessions and divided loyalties by emphasizing and connecting it to the issue of "worry." Jesus refers to the kind of worry that leads to a divided loyalty and to unhealthy

obsessions with the accumulation of money, possessions and the preservation of wealth to the exclusion of everything, everyone, and most importantly, to the exclusion of God. This section of the Sermon on the Mount is a call to trust God as an answer to one of the most plaguing human problems with which we have to cope, to worry or not to worry...and that is the question we are talking about today.

Like most of us, I have always been a big fan of Charles Schultz's comic strip, Peanuts. In this particular cartoon, Snoopy is lying flat on his back atop his old doghouse. "Rats," he cries. Now he sits up and continues, "How can I sleep knowing that any moment a wolf could come by and blow my house down." Leaning over the roof, he says, "Life has too many worries...today it's wolves..." and pulling out his tennis racket, he cries,

"Yesterday, it was my backhand."

I don't know anybody who doesn't have something to worry about.

When I was preparing this sermon I thought it might be good to say something infomercial like "You too can be worry free." Or, do you remember the song from Bobby McFarren, Here's a little song I wrote, you might want to sing it note for note, *don't worry, be happy?* I thought better of both those approaches because I realized no one would believe

me. The truth is, I don't believe it, either. To desire a life that is "worry free" is in all likelihood a trip to fantasy land. I looked up a few statistics from MD Magazine and American Demographics. Between 20 to 30 percent of all Americans will live today under significant stress. Thirteen million will worry for at least 90 minutes. It may be about our marriages, partnerships, children, jobs, mortgages, money, health, grades, friends or a host of other endless issues. Whatever the source worry is an emotion with which all of us are familiar and which 27 percent of us experience virtually on a daily basis. 15 percent of us are "chronic worriers" meaning that to some extent we worry all the time. The single most common source of worry is not the fear of war, terrorism, financial disaster, unemployment, holes in the ozone, AIDS, cancer, loss of a job, loss of our health, divorce or any of those topics that we might place at the top of the traditional worry list. Are you ready for this? The single most frequent source of worry is other people's opinions about us and how we live our lives. The worrying scenario begins, "If blank happens to me, then what will blank think?" "What will people say?" Will I be laughed at?" "Will I be excluded?" To become "worry free"? Not likely. The sad truth is that regardless of what we have done or left undone, we really cannot change others

opinions about our lives. Arrogance deceives us into thinking we possess that kind of power. Truly, we do not. People will believe whatever they want to believe about us. But it is entirely possible to become increasingly less worried about peripheral issues. It is possible to become less dominated by our fears and more motivated by our faith. Jesus makes this connection directly in verse 30, “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.” In this passage, Jesus is saying that chronic worrying is essentially distrust of God. It is a sign of a lack of faith in God.

I love verse 26 when Jesus says, “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?” This brings me back to my childhood and to a very simple yet profound poem I learned many years ago titled, *Surely the Birds do*.

**Said the robin to the sparrow
I should really like to know
Why these anxious human beings
Rush around and worry so.**

**Said the sparrow to the robin
Friend I think that it must be
That they have no heavenly Father
Such as cares for you and me.**

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, Jesus makes worry a matter of faith. Do we really believe that our God and Father values us? Do we really believe our God and Father cares for us? Do we really believe our God and Father truly loves us? What matters most is not what others think when they look at us. What matters most is what God thinks when God looks inside of us. And yet that concern so frequently receives the least attention. We go on worrying about that which matters so little and ignoring that which matters most of all.

In verse 34, Jesus says, “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” In other words, Jesus asks us “What’s the hurry?” Our Lord tells us not to worry about tomorrow. Live one day at a time. God will take care of the future. The best we can reasonably do in this world is to live one day at a time and leave the rest up to God. Too often we become trapped in the past or seduced by the future to the point we miss out on the present, which is actually all any of us ever possess.

When I was in the seminary, my homiletics professor would say a good preacher is most effective when the sermon you preach is the one you really need to hear. This is certainly a sermon I need to hear. My problem is not the past. My problem is the seduction of the future. I

worry about questions that I have absolutely no power over such as,
**When will Bishop Wolf give me my ordination date to the priesthood?
When will the people of St. Luke's choose a new rector? Where will I go
after St. Luke's? Will I be able to find a church here in Rhode Island or
will Linda and I end up in another state? And of course the ever present
undeniable question, "What do people think about me?"**

**Why do we operate under the delusion that our greatest power comes
from within ourselves and is based on our own capabilities, talents, and
skills when in fact we are all powerless? This is a universal truth about
our human condition. Yet, one of our greatest problems as human
beings is our egocentric belief that we have total control over the events
and circumstances of our lives. We hold ourselves hostage to the belief
that if we try hard enough, if we believe deeply enough, and if we work
long and hard enough, we will be able to control our own destinies.**

**Don't get me wrong, I strongly believe in hard work, discipline and
perseverance. I know that these virtues are necessary to accomplish
many goals in our lives. However, when it comes to our spiritual lives,
these virtues alone cannot free us from worry. Alcoholics Anonymous
has a great saying, "Let go and Let God."**

