

SEEK THE WELFARE: YOU CANNOT SERVE TWO MASTERS

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Scripture: Matthew 6:24-34. The scripture reading may be found at the end of the sermon.

This is a written transcription of the video message Adam Fronczek offered on Sunday, September 20, 2020. The full video can be found at knox.org/sundayseptember20.

This sermon was preached at the Pavelka home. It again includes small group discussion topics that go with the sermon, for use by any and all who might gather together safely to experience our online worship. Today's opening questions was the following:

Why was it important for you to be here today? Or a slightly bolder version of the same question: **How valuable an experience do you plan for this to be?** I love this question because it's about possibilities and the richest possible use of our time. How often do we go to worship, and many other experiences, not asking ourselves with any intentionality why we are doing it or what we hope we will experience. Not surprisingly, this leads to passive experiences and little impact on our lives. Give this question a try and see if answering it enriches your worship experience.

Before continuing, I also want to make a comment about the Scripture for today. This is one of many passages in the Bible that uses slavery as a metaphor and makes no comment about the institution. Slavery was an accepted institution in the ancient world, and the Bible's failure to challenge that reality has led to unspeakable suffering throughout history. It is important whenever we read one of these passages to acknowledge and lament that tragic history and commit to reading the Bible carefully and critically in ways that encourage greater justice today. Even when the focus of a particular sermon is not on slavery in the Bible, I believe that it is important to name these injustices we find in some pages of our Scriptures.

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SERMON:

“Do not worry.” Those were the words that stuck out to me as I read this passage. There are always things to worry about, and these days that's certainly true. And I found myself wondering this week: Is it helpful to tell people not to worry? Could that advice cause someone to worry even more? I read last week that asking a person not to worry is a lot like asking them not to think about an elephant. An elephant may not have crossed your mind for weeks, but the moment I tell you not to think about one, you can't get it out of your mind. Is it like that with worry? Even in regular times, instructing someone not to worry can make our worries top of mind. So, in times like these, I wonder if telling someone not to worry might sound insensitive, or just plain out of touch.

So, why does Jesus say this? What is he up to? Is he actually being helpful when Jesus tells his listeners, “Do not worry?” Well, I'm a preacher, so you won't be surprised when I say that yes, I think Jesus is giving helpful advice. But it's important to put it in context. Jesus is saying something much deeper than “Don't worry, be happy.” And you've got to dig a little to find the treasure in his words. So, I'm going to start by talking about the biblical context in which Jesus makes this comment, and then I'll talk about what I think it has to do with us.

Understanding this passage correctly begins with starting to read in the right place. This passage is often read beginning with verse 25: “Therefore, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink or about your body, what you will wear.” Isn't that a strange place to begin? Can you imagine any other context in which you would read a story that begins with “Therefore” and not ask what was said first? But people read this passage beginning at verse 25 all the time. The context is back in verse 24—that's where Jesus begins. “No one can serve two masters,” Jesus says. “...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.” Then, Jesus goes on to say: “*Therefore*, do not worry about your life...”

This passage isn't just about worry; it's about the problem of trying to serve two masters. And Jesus says this is hard to do. Even given our objections to the slavery metaphor, there are many things that hold mastery or ultimate influence in our lives. Jesus is right that you cannot have a rich spiritual life if you are too swept up in the pursuit of material things.

It is from this warning about serving two masters that Jesus talks about worry and unfolds the familiar poetic tapestry about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. Look how happy they are, says Jesus, for they know that their Creator loves them. They are not distracted from God's love by keeping up with the Joneses; they are not managing their anxiety with retail therapy. The birds of the

air and the lilies of the field do not worry because they know where their loyalty lies—they know God has mastery over their lives.

So, now we know what the message of the passage is supposed to be, but we still may be stuck on whether it really is helpful when Jesus tells people not to worry. Not only is it important to start reading in the right place, but it's also important to consider the audience in this passage, which is part of the Sermon on the Mount. An important clue about the audience for this sermon is found in verses 31-32; Jesus says, "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."

Who is the audience for this comment?

The people who came to listen to the Sermon on the Mount were humble people, living in tough times on the receiving end of oppression. The Roman Empire controlled their cities, and from the countryside the Romans siphoned resources of food, water, and money for the benefit of the occupying armies. So when Jesus talks about "'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'" he was speaking to an audience of people who may have been asking those very questions on a daily basis. When Jesus suggests they should not worry about those questions, people might have found him to be really insensitive or insulting...except for the thing he says next: He says, "For it is the Gentiles who *strive* for all these things; and indeed, your Heavenly Father knows that you need all these things."

Jesus does not say, "Yeah, you're hungry, but don't worry about it—just be happy." Instead, Jesus says, "God *knows* that you need those things—to have food, and water, and clothing. And, he continues, "the people who are really spiritually lost are not you, but the Gentiles—the Roman occupiers. They have more than their share, but they still *strive*, worrying about getting more and more food and water and clothing, and in the process they leave you without enough."

Jesus is not blind to the suffering experienced by those who are seated before him; he names their suffering, and he tells them that God is on their side—and he says this with credibility, because Jesus was one who did *not* take more than he needed.

If you take the two ideas I've been talking about together, you see that to Jesus' immediate audience, he's not preaching *at* them; he's comforting them. 'You can't serve two masters,' Jesus says. "You can't serve God and wealth." 'And I can see that you people aren't serving wealth. And God has not forgotten about you.'

And then there is a second audience. The Gentiles. The Romans. They might not have been the immediate audience for his sermon, but Jesus knew they

would hear about it. These are the dominant people in their culture. These people have enough to eat and drink and wear, but they are always worried that they *won't* have enough, or that they don't have as much as someone else, so they want even more. These are the ones who serve wealth and not God. And they worry because they serve a master who never satisfies them.

We've seen this character type all over the Bible in one story after another.

This is the Pharaoh who is the wealthiest man in Egypt, but forces the Hebrews to make bricks without straw—why? Because he is anxious about not having enough.

This is the rich man in Jesus' parable who runs out of space in his barns because he has so much grain...and his solution to that problem is not to get rid of some grain, but to build bigger barns—why? Because he is afraid he will not have enough.

These are the ones who serve wealth and not God. These are the ones who worry—who are anxious in life—because they serve a master who never satisfies. This life of the Gentile, a life of never having enough...it is a life of anxiety; it is a life of worry. And the hard edge of this passage of scripture is that if you are not experiencing a genuine shortage of needs like food or water or clothing, you are most likely a Gentile, and that includes most of the people listening to this sermon—and also the one who is preaching it.

So, in his greatest sermon, Jesus talks about worry. He says, "do not worry," and it turns out that message is for at least two groups of people. Jesus is compassionate toward people who worry about having enough of the things they really need; and Jesus challenges those of us who worry all the time because we never have enough of what we want. We are serving a master who offers no real security.

In normal days, I might preach this same setup and talk about stewardship. I might talk about being aware of people who are in genuine need, and I'd talk about the blessing of being generous; I would talk about God's preference for the vulnerable and God's challenge to the powerful. All of that would be true. But in these days, it seems like the thing we also need to talk about is...worry, and how worry works. For we have plenty to worry about right now.

I know that in my own life, my worries have evolved during these times of COVID. Early on, I worried a lot about getting the virus. How severe would it be? Who would watch our kids if Anna and I became ill at the same time? Who might I infect without even knowing it? The stress of these questions was horrible because there are no concrete answers to those kinds of hypotheticals. And because there's overlap between a respiratory virus and some of what I experience with seasonal allergies, for a while I worried that I was getting COVID on a pretty regular basis.

As the weeks stretched into months--and we realized that we're going to be living this way for a while--it occurred to me that those kinds of worries aren't sustainable. Carrying those worries results in a stress that I pass on to my family and my coworkers, and it keeps me from doing the work I need to be doing out in our community as a pastor—work that gives my life meaning and purpose.

So, in more recent days, I've been going through a transition in my thinking. It's not that I have no fear of getting the virus. But I've resolved that if I wear a mask, keep my distance, and wash my hands, I'm doing most of what I can do to keep myself and others safe. Within those parameters, I've got to do things that will sustain my mental, spiritual, and physical health, so that I can take care of the people in my life, and so that I can worry productively—about the welfare of others whose situation is more precarious than my own. In this way, my worries have evolved; they were once about things I could never control or satisfy.

I'm a work in progress, but I'm trying worry instead about things I have the power to change.

In talking to his two different audiences, Jesus is implying that there are times to worry and times not to, and that there are things worth worrying about and things that are not. It is understandable, and even praiseworthy, to worry about genuine needs and to try to do something about them. But it is foolish to worry about things that are beyond your control, or to anxiously strive for a worry-free existence that can never be satisfied.

Walter Brueggemann is an Old Testament scholar and a poetic author of many sermons and prayers. Here's what he writes in one prayer, which he calls "Your New Word amid Our Anxiety."

"The promises roll off your lips and into our ears:

I will be with you

I will love you faithfully;

I will be your God;

My covenant is forever.

We count on your words that flow from our ears to our hearts,

and we are glad..."

The prayer continues:

"We keep inventing ourselves and our underneath selves turn out

to be less than adequate

and we wish we were other than we are.

*We juggle your good purposes and
our own hidden yearnings and
try to serve two masters,
try to live two narratives,
try to live two dreams,
and we are weary.*

*Because we know our hearts of anxiety so well,
we seem fated to disease.
But because we know your heart of fidelity so well,
we know you will defeat our demons and make us new.
We know about your abiding fidelity in
Jesus of Nazareth.*

*Give us patience and steadfastness
as we process the ragged edges of our lives.”*

(Brueggemann, Your New Word amid Our Anxiety, in Prayers for a Privileged People)

There are ragged edges in many of our lives these days, and there are people in our communities whose lives are not just ragged on the edges but are worn to the bone. Let us remember in these days that God is compassionate and exists in solidarity with those whose lives are most desperate—people who have real worry these days. And for those of us who may be less desperate, but still get caught up worrying about the wrong things, let us recommit ourselves to serving the master who can give us some peace. And, let us shift our worries to people and situations we have the power to change.

Amen.

The sermon response discussion questions for today are:

What has caused you concern/worry/anxiety during these past six months, and how are you seeing those feelings evolve?

What is going on in our community right now that you have the power to change?

MATTHEW 6:24-34

New Revised Standard Version

Serving Two Masters

24 “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.ⁱ

Do Not Worry

25 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink,ⁱ or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? **26** 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? **27** And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? **28** And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, **29** yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. **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? **31** Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ **32** For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. **33** But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

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