



The Stakes Are High:
“SO DON’T SERVE TWO MASTERS”

Rev. Laurie Haller
First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: 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 his 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.”

Years ago when Gary and I were serving a church together in Grand Rapids, two staff members and I were coming back from a conference in Ohio. We were meeting with pastors and staff of other large, downtown, urban United Methodist churches in the Midwest to network and share our common challenges. We left the conference a little early because I had to officiate at a 6 p.m. funeral back in Grand Rapids. I had pretty much completed the funeral sermon before I left because I knew I would arrive home just in time to change my clothes and get to the funeral by 6 p.m.

We knew we would have to get gas at some point, but when we stopped for lunch, we all forgot about it. One of the staff members drove our Ford Aerostar van after lunch while I sat in the back seat and worked on the funeral. I was completely focused and oblivious to my surroundings, so

when my friends asked about a strange noise they heard from the van, I said I didn't know what it was. So we went on our merry way.

Well, right past Ann Arbor on US 23, two hours from home, we realized we were running out of gas. Mind you, this was before cell phones. My friend pulled over to the side of the road directly opposite a rest area on the other side. We decided it would be too risky to try to limp along to the next exit because if the van stopped, we wouldn't be near a phone, and then we'd be in worse trouble.

So I ran across four lanes of highway traffic to get to the rest area and use the pay phone. Do you remember the days before cell phones? I was concerned because I had not allowed much wiggle time, which is one among many of my tragic flaws. I had planned to get home, change in five minutes and leave for the funeral. I called AAA, explained where I was, and said that I hoped someone could come pretty soon because I had to officiate at a funeral two hours away. I'm sure they were thinking, "Yeah, right. Haven't heard that one before!"

I ran back across four lanes of highway to the van, and there we sat for what seemed like hours. I kept looking at my watch, knowing that if I didn't show up for the funeral, I'd be in big trouble. In the worst case scenario, I thought Gary could get into my computer, print off a copy of the funeral sermon and show up instead of me. But that meant I'd have to run across four lanes of a congested expressway again during rush hour to call him. And it meant he'd have to be home when I called.

A man from the gas station finally came with enough gas to get us to the next exit where we filled up and made a beeline for home. I walked into the funeral home at three minutes before 6 p.m., put on my robe, took a minute to compose myself and proceeded with the funeral as if everything was just fine, which it was. Every time I pass that rest stop, I say a prayer of thanks to God for helping me get to that funeral on time.

"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?" Sure, Jesus, easy for you to say! You're just like Alfred E. Neuman of *Mad Magazine* with his goofy grin, saying, "What, me worry?"

Here's what I think, Jesus. Sometimes the stakes are way too high not to worry. If I had been worrying about making sure my car was full of gas instead of the nuances of the funeral sermon, I wouldn't have had to risk my life running across four lanes of US 23. And, Jesus, what's this about not serving two masters? I love you and am committed to you with all my heart, but I also have to make a living and put a roof over the head of my family. I don't need to be rich, but I do need to provide for them.

This passage from Matthew is a familiar one. Actually, it's one of the most relevant scriptures for Americans today because we're a nation of worriers. Americans probably worry more than any other people on this earth. We worry about our children, our parents, our job, our marriage, our church, our schools, our nation and our world. We are stressed-out people. All you need to do is watch the commercials during the evening news. What is advertised? All sorts of remedies

for headaches, hypertension, hemorrhoids, heartburn, upset stomachs, ulcers and insomnia, all of which can be products of too much stress.

Naturally, our adult stress is transferred to our children and our grandchildren. Why can't kids just be kids? Whatever happened to kids going outside to play after school? Now it's organized sports, structured fun, private lessons, a myriad of clubs, choir, youth group and homework. And it only gets worse in middle school and high school. The demands we place on our children to achieve are enormous, and the expectation of getting into a good college can sap the spirit right out of our youth.

I have a good friend whose son graduated from one of Michigan's premier universities in pre-med a year and a half ago. His grades were excellent. I've always thought, "This young man is going to be one of the best physicians ever!" He took the suggested year off to work in a medical-related field and also studied to take the MCAT, the Medical College Admission Test. His score was outstanding. He applied to fourteen medical schools a year ago, ranging from the very best to a shoe-in. And guess what? He was not accepted into any of them! Not even one.

After consulting with medical career counselors, he was told, "You have to understand that you're competing with people equally qualified as you, so you have to figure out a way to stand out, to differentiate yourself from others. The stakes are high. You need to hire someone to help you with your essays."

That's the way it is today, not only in our world but also in the church. Our young people have no choice but to take education and employment seriously. In the same way, we must take church growth and vitality seriously. Nothing is going to be handed to us anymore. People are not going to form a line to get into the sanctuary or CLC for worship unless we proclaim a gospel that is relevant, compelling, touches the deepest needs of the human heart and inspires others to change the world.

So how do we balance doing the best we can in the world with striving first for the kingdom of God? How do we make wise decisions about the future yet not obsess about tomorrow? How do we avoid the seduction of money and financial security by serving God rather than wealth? How do we learn to say:

- I have enough. I don't need more.
- I have done enough. I'm putting this into God's hands.
- I am enough. I don't have to prove anything to God and others.

How do we strive first for the kingdom of God? First, be fully present to each day. Live one day at a time. On April 20, 1913, a world-renowned physician stood up to address the student body at Yale University. His name was Sir William Osler. At the time he was the Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford. He was also one of the four founding professors of Johns Hopkins Hospital. Not only was Sir William Osler the author of the greatest standard medical textbook of his day, but by his teaching and example, Osler had raised the practice of medicine on two continents to a new level of dignity and service.

In addition to being a brilliant medical technician, Sir William Osler was also a lover of English literature and a highly respected philosopher. Beside all of that, Osler was an intensely human man, a warm gregarious personality, full of fun, happy, radiant, zestful, keenly interested in people and finding his chief delight in playing with little children and writing letters to them.

Think about that: a world famous physician, author and lecturer, one of the most eminent men of science in his day, taking time to write letters to little children. How could any one person crowd into a single day such a wide range of activities contributing so much to his profession and to the world, and yet still find ample time to play and read, to think and study, to love and rest and celebrate life so vibrantly?

Well, Sir William Osler had a secret. He called it his philosophy of life, and it was this philosophy that he shared with the students of Yale University that day. It was the practice of living one day at a time. Osler called it “living in day-tight compartments.” He said, “Throw away all ambition beyond doing the day’s work well. The travelers on the road to success live in the present, heedless of taking thought for the morrow. So, live neither in the past nor in the future, but let each day absorb your entire energies and satisfy your widest ambitions.” Live in day-tight compartments.

How do we strive first for the kingdom of God? We acknowledge that the big picture is more important than virtually all of the petty things that worry us. When Jesus tells us here not to worry, he’s not saying we should be careless or reckless or have a devil-may-care attitude. Nor is he saying we shouldn’t be prudent or cautious or act with forethought. Sometimes it is appropriate to be very concerned about people or issues. Rather, the Greek word here for worry, *merimna*, means to worry anxiously. It implies a lack of serenity and a lack of faith. It means that we are so preoccupied with our pesky problems that we cannot even see the birds, smell the flowers or hear the fallen leaves crunch under our feet.

There isn’t often much we can do about a lot of the things that worry us, anyway. Yes, there are many ways in which we can and must change the world, but the stress of worrying excessively is a killer. Stress doesn’t lengthen our lives, it shortens them. William Quayle was elected a bishop in the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1908. He liked to tell the story about one night when he lay wide awake, bone weary but unable to fall asleep. He was worrying about the state of the world in general and his own responsibilities in particular. But about two o’clock in the morning, the Lord said to him, “Now Bill, you go to sleep for a while, and I’ll stay up and worry the rest of the night.”

Finally, we mustn’t forget verse 24 because it’s this first verse that provides the context for what follows. “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.”

Why do we worry so much? Why is it so difficult to live in day-tight compartments? It’s because we’re afraid that we won’t have enough, right? We won’t have enough money to see us through retirement. We won’t have enough saved up to live in the style to which we are accustomed. We won’t have enough to feel secure. We won’t have enough to leave to our children and to the church.

How much is enough, anyway? The stakes are so high in our world today. Our futures certainly don't seem to be as secure as they were fifty or twenty-five or even ten years ago. How much do we need to live? How much do we need to provide for our families? How much do we give through First Church to God's work of mercy, justice and love in our community and around the world? Is it possible to let go of our anxiety and be fully engaged in the present by living in day-tight compartments? Can we seek first God's kingdom and righteousness, knowing that God will take care of us?

I know that some of you are currently taking the Financial Peace University class by Dave Ramsey or have taken it in the past. Everyone I know who has taken the course comes away with a new understanding of the "fake gloss" of what society calls success and what it means to seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness. A few months ago Gary and I went out for dinner with friends whose lives have been transformed by Financial Peace University. On the table they had an envelope with them labeled, "Eating out." The cash inside that envelope was all they allowed themselves to use that month because they decided that that amount was "enough." If that wasn't humbling enough, they insisted on treating us. Every day Ruth and Don practice financial peace by making a conscious decision to serve God rather than money.

Which master will you serve: God or wealth? Is it money and success or faithfulness? Is it worry or living fully in the present? Is it serving oneself or serving others? Is it keeping or giving? 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...especially if you run out of gas on US 23.