

Sermon: Matthew 6:24-34 (Epiphany 8a)
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Matthew 6:24 - 34 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. ²⁵ "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? 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.

You and I live in a time of chronic and deep-seated anxiety. Just look at the proliferation of medications, self-help books, forms of meditation, antacids, and other things that promise to help! When we're so anxious (with some good reason), Jesus' teaching not to worry might strike us as glib. But it's important to remember that the people who first heard those words were in a very different situation than we are. We worry a lot about food--how to avoid eating too much of it, how many calories or carbs or fat grams a certain food has, whether our diet is making us healthy in the long run. People in Jesus' time worried about food, too—mostly whether there'd be enough. Period. We worry about clothes—how we look in them, whether our clothes are stylishly up-to-date yet classic, whether they flatter our body shape, whether they might be getting too worn. People in Jesus' time worried about clothes, too—mostly whether they'd have enough to protect them from the elements.

These are very different worries, and yet they both relate to how Jesus introduces this part of his Sermon on the Mount: "No one can serve two masters . . . you cannot serve both God and wealth." This is true whether it's a subsistence economy like the one Jesus lived in, or our own 21st century economy of consumerism and indebtedness chasing after material wealth. "Do not worry," Jesus says. *Look at the birds, look at the flowers.* If there were a bird here in the church this morning it wouldn't help us not to worry. As a matter of fact, during my first sermon as a seminarian at Christ Church Cathedral, Indianapolis, there was a bat flying around--we worried! No, we don't have a bird in the church, but we do have flowers here at the altar, even lilies! Just take a moment in quiet to look at these flowers (and if you can't see them, just close your eyes).

You may say, "Fine, Rob, but we can't just sit here all the time and look at flowers!" and I agree completely. You and I have responsibilities—to our families and loved ones and friends, to our neighbors and co-workers, to humanity in general and to the God who created us. Jesus'

message is not the cliché, “Don’t worry, be happy!” Maybe you’ve heard the story about the woman who refused to evacuate when a flood started to rise near her house. A jeep drove up and the rescue worker said, “Come with me, I can still get you out on dry land,” but the woman said, “No, I prayed for help and God will take care of me.” The flood waters rose, and a boat came to the woman’s second-story window: “Come on, you have to evacuate!” But the woman said, No, I prayed for help and God will take care of me.” The waters kept rising and the woman had to climb up onto her roof. A helicopter came and hailed her: “GRAB ON TO THE LADDER AND WE’LL PULL YOU UP!” But the woman shouted back, “NO, I PRAYED FOR HELP AND GOD WILL TAKE CARE OF ME!” The flood waters kept rising, the woman was swept away, and then she drowned. At the Pearly Gates she saw God and asked, “I prayed for help and believed you would help me! Why didn’t you?” God replied, “I sent you a jeep, a boat, and a helicopter; what more did you want?!”

It would be nice; it would be convenient, it would be great, if I could stand here in front of you and say that we need God, and when we put God first, we’ll get everything else we want and life will be rosy. I am saying that we need God, and if we don’t put God first, all the other things won’t satisfy our need for God. I’m talking about reexamining our priorities from the ground up and being willing to put them in the order God would have us. It’s not easy to be asked to set aside things we can see--things that are highly valued in our society. It’s not easy to set them aside for the Kingdom of God, which we can’t see or count. And yet the things we can see and count and be congratulated for or looked up to for will not ultimately satisfy.

What can that re-ordering of priorities look like? When Amy was pregnant with Caroline, we were talking to some friends our age who had a couple of young kids about what it’s like to take that step—that huge leap--into parenthood. We talked about the costs—in time and in money—and how Amy and I enjoyed going out and wouldn’t be able to nearly so much after having a baby. “It’s OK,” Jill told us (and she liked going out even more than we did). “It’s OK because you won’t want to go out nearly as much.” And she was right; our lives changed and our priorities changed, and Amy and I became all the happier.

If you’re like me, re-setting priorities once isn’t enough, though. It’s something to do again and again--a decision to make daily. How many of you as kids rubbed a needle with a magnet and put it in a bowl of water? When you do that, the needle is magnetized and points north, like a compass. But after a while the needle loses its magnetic charge and you have to rub it with the magnet again to keep it pointing north. It’s the same with our priorities. How many of us have said with all the best intentions, “There aren’t enough hours in the day to do all that I need to get done!?” And yet Jesus asks, “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” Don’t get me wrong; there’s plenty to be worried about! I worry about the future of our country, and what’s coming next in the Middle East and how it will affect the whole world. I worry about how well people are going to be able to come out of the recession, about the education our children receive and the influence on their brains of so much electronic stimuli.

When Jesus says in Matthew’s Gospel not to worry, not to be anxious or preoccupied, it carries the sense of not having a divided mind. Multitasking is considered a virtue in our culture, but when it comes to matters of the heart, not so much! When Caroline was born and I was in Amy’s hospital room, the nurses remarked that I didn’t have the TV on like so many of the other

dads who were watching sports. While I couldn't imagine dividing my attention at that holy time in the life of our family, there are plenty of times when I'm tempted to give attention to two things at once. When I do that, I don't do either as well as I could if I focused on one at a time.

Jesus tells us, "You can't serve two masters. . . . Don't worry about food or clothing. . . . Don't worry about tomorrow." But with all of these negative instructions—not to do this and that—he leads us to an overwhelming positive. Being called to give single-minded attention to God is not a problem or limitation, but a priceless gift! St. Augustine prayed, "O God you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you." Take a moment in quiet again, please, to consider the lilies here at the altar. (pause) Strive first for the kingdom of God and the righteousness of God. Everything else somehow, some way, will eventually work itself out.

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