

An Inflation-Proof Faith

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Matthew 6:24-34 (NRSV)

"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.

DON'T WORRY?

Some weeks I really have to work hard in order to make our Scripture lesson relevant to what is going on in our world today. Some weeks I have to do a lot of research, and try out different angles to keep your attention.

But, this week's Scripture lesson is as current as the morning newspaper. Jesus told his disciples "Don't worry about what you will eat or what you will drink or what you will wear." In other words, don't worry about economic issues.

But, we do worry, don't we? We worry about rising food costs. We worry about having to pay \$4.00 a gallon for gasoline. At least it was \$4.00 a gallon when I wrote this. Who knows what we'll have to pay today.

We worry about the mortgage crisis and the decline of property values. We worry about inflation. We worry about having to pay fifteen dollars more to check a bag on an airplane. We worry that the stock market is down.

We worry and with good reason.

Perhaps most of us don't have to worry about putting clothes on our back and food in our stomach today, but who knows what can happen in a volatile economy like ours. I might not be

the prophet or the son of a prophet, but I believe the handwriting is on the wall. Rough times are coming.

Jesus tells us not to worry, but it seems to me that we've got plenty to worry about. How can Jesus tell us not to worry at a time like this? How can we be expect to maintain our faith when the news is so bad?

A lot of people are saying that we have to meet the current crisis in our country by changing our lifestyle. We have to learn how to make sacrifices for the common good. We have to learn how to be more efficient in our use of fuel. We have to be more compassionate and concerned about our neighbor. We have to be concerned about pollution and global warming. We have to spend more on education and health care.

This past Wednesday I went to hear presidential candidate Barak Obama, and he made all of these very points. He said that there is a sense of urgency when it comes to these decisions. We need to be worried. We don't need the same old Washington politics. Something needs to change, and it needs to happen now. The crowd went wild.

We will disagree about what the answers might be for our country and who is best equipped to lead us during this time of transition, but I suspect all of us here today agree on one thing. We need to do something. We all have good reason to be worried.

A WORLD THAT RUNS ON WORRY

And then I read this passage from the gospel of Matthew, and Jesus tells us that we shouldn't worry. We shouldn't be concerned about the price of gas and the housing slump. We shouldn't even be worried about food and clothing.

How long do you think a presidential candidate would last if he or she just told us not to worry? They wouldn't make it very long. They would be accused of being out of touch with the average person and would soon be out of the race.

Washington and Wall Street run on worry. Politicians and salesmen count on us being worried about life. If we're not worried then they can't make their case. If we're satisfied, they have to make up a problem so that we can be motivated to vote or buy some product. That's why politicians always see the glass as half empty and salesmen talk to us about the "heartbreak of psoriasis"!

VOTE FOR GOD OVER MAMMON

Jesus tells us that the reason we worry is not because gas is four dollars a gallon or the fact that we have a hard time paying our bills each month. The reason we worry is because our priorities are hopelessly out of whack. We worship the wrong thing. Instead of worshipping God we worship wealth.

The biggest choice we make this year is not whether we vote for John McCain or Barak Obama. The biggest choice we make this year is whether we worship God or Mammon.

Mammon is a transliteration of the Greek word that the NRSV translates as wealth. But, really we're talking about more than wealth when we talk about Mammon. My Greek-English dictionary defines this word as "wealth personified and avarice deified."

In other words, the pursuit of wealth can take on a life of its own. And it doesn't make any difference if we are rich or poor. In this passage Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about food and clothing. Now if those disciples were not supposed to worry about food and clothing surely we're not supposed to worry about the price of gas and the real estate crisis.

Don't misunderstand. I don't think that this passage means that we are to be foolish about the future. Surely good stewardship requires us to think about ways to reduce our use of nonrenewable sources of energy, and it's just a matter of common sense for us to try and change our lifestyle in order to adjust to the rising price of gas.

It just makes good sense to change our lending practices and help where we can when people are in trouble financially. It just makes good sense for us to work hard and be prudent financially.

But, according to this passage, even the most important financial issues should not assume the number one spot in our lives. There can only be one Master, and his name is not Mammon. The Lord our God, the Creator of heaven and earth is our Master. Our ultimate allegiance should be to Him alone.

VOTING ON BREAD AND BUTTER ISSUES

Now this sounds like a "no brainer." Of course our ultimate allegiance should be to God. Of course the pursuit of financial security is not a worthy god.

But, what really takes number one in our life? Who do we really vote for when it comes to our actions?

We may vote for God with our lips, but we often vote for Mammon with our life. Our days are spent filled with anxiety about "bread and butter" issues (as the politicians call them).

Jesus tells us that worry is not an effective strategy.

Myron Augsburger in his commentary on Matthew talks about three ways that worry is not an appropriate reaction for a Christian.

Worry is irreverent.

Worry is irrelevant.

And worry is irresponsible.

Let's look at those in order.

IRREVERENT

First, worry is irreverent. Worry does not take into account the Providential care of God.

We believe that the God who created this world also cares for it on a daily basis. Jesus gave us some examples of how God cares for His world from nature.

The birds aren't worried about where their next meal is coming from. The birds instinctively know where to find food because God created a world that is suited to their needs. If God thinks enough of the birds to care for them, don't you think he will care for you?

Jesus also said that God clothes the lilies of the field in a way that is more magnificent than even King Solomon in all his glory. If God does this for plants that are here today and gone tomorrow, don't you think that he will give us the clothes that we need?

If we worry too much about what might happen tomorrow, we are being irreverent. We are taking God out of the picture. We are saying that it's all up to us. Instead of singing, "This is my Father's world," we fret over what might happen tomorrow.

I must say that this excessive worry about tomorrow is exacerbated by the news channels. Many of us keep those "talking heads" on all day long, and they do nothing but talk about what is wrong in the world and what might happen tomorrow. Again, don't misunderstand. I think it's important to consider these issues and plan for the future.

But, some of these programs amount to nothing more than electronic hand-wringing.

And many people who watch these programs all the time come up to me and say, "Pastor, I'm worried about the future. Everything's going to the dogs. All the politicians are dishonest. The economy is in terrible shape. Do you think end of the world is just around the corner?"

Jesus would tell us, "You need to remember who's really in charge, and that will reduce your anxiety. The future is not up to us or to any of our leaders. The future is in God's hands. This is my Father's world.

Go out and observe the miracles of nature. Think about the complexity of the universe. Why do you think that the earth is just the right distance from the sun and tilted on its axis at just the right angle? It is because God made it that way."

If worry overwhelms us, we are listening to the news too much and listening to God's promises too little.

IRRELEVANT

So overwhelming worry is first of all irreverent, and second it is also irrelevant. Jesus said, "Can you add even an hour to your life by worrying about things?"

The answer of course is no. In fact, there is ample medical evidence that worry can even subtract years from your life.

Worry about the future is a very wasteful activity. I heard once that 90 percent of the things that we worry about never come true. I'm not sure if that's an accurate percentage or not, but certainly we worry about a lot of things that don't turn out to be a problem.

Do you remember the great worry as we approached the year 2000? Supposedly some of our older and yet important computers wouldn't work any more because they couldn't read the date.

President Clinton talked about it before Congress. The people on the news shows told us to invest in generators and non-perishable food because the power grid would fail.

The world held its breath as the New Year began. And nothing happened.

We soon forgot about that needless worry, but for me it symbolizes how we often live. We worry about things that we can't control even if they're true, and quite often our worries prove to be much ado about nothing.

Jesus tells us that worry about the future is irrelevant. We don't have any control of the future.

We will have to leave the future in God's capable hands whether we like it or not!

I know that some of us feel that we have to help God out by worrying about what may happen, but in the final analysis, that's God's call and not our call.

What we think about and worry about is often irrelevant!

IRRESPONSIBLE

So worry is irreverent, irrelevant and third, worry is irresponsible. I think that this is the most important point of this passage. Worry drains us of the psychic energy we need to actually do something about the problems that we have today.

Think about the last verse of our lesson for today. Jesus said, "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." Matthew 6:34 (NRSV)

Someone once told me, "Don't try to do everything. Just do the next thing." I live by that saying, and during the really tough times it keeps me sane.

The reason many people get into trouble and lose faith is that they borrow trouble from tomorrow. And they do not take care of today. Today is the only day that we are promised.

Let us do what we can today, and let us give thanks for the day that we have been given. Let us live by what the Psalmist said, "This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." (Psalm 118:24)

In our Bible study this past week we talked about the fact that there is a difference between anxiety and concern. If we are concerned about a problem we figure out a way to solve the problem. We take action. But, if we are anxious about a problem this suggests that we are so overwhelmed emotionally that we have trouble taking action, or if we do take action it is often a rash action that can be counterproductive.

Whenever I counsel with someone, I promise that I will pray for them, and I ask them to pray as well. But, I also ask them to do something else. If possible I suggest some ways that they can make their situation better, and I ask them to tell me about their efforts to solve their problems at our next counseling session. Sometimes people avoid making that second appointment because they have not taken even one of the steps I have suggested. Worry keeps them from taking action.

Worry is not very effective. The most effective way to deal with a problem is not to worry but to take action today. If you do what you can do today, you'll be amazed at how this will relieve your fears about tomorrow.

LIFE IS GREATER THAN OUR WORRIES

Jesus reminds us in this passage that life is more than what we drink and what we eat and what we wear and how much our house is worth and how much we have to pay for a gallon of gas. In the grand scheme of things even these important problems are not that significant.

The significant thing according to Jesus is not how much we have accumulated here on earth. The significant thing is the treasure that have stored in heaven. Treasure in heaven is not subject to inflation, the laws of supply and demand or any of those other "moths" that threaten to eat away at our future.

A good way to determine what is really important is ask ourselves if this task or concern will be important when we are reaching the end of life. We had a good example of this in the news this past week. Senator Ted Kennedy was diagnosed as having an inoperable brain tumor.

Ted has been seen as the Messiah or the Devil depending on your political viewpoints.

But, in light of his serious illness, politics took a back seat for just a little while. Obama, Clinton and McCain all gave heartfelt and touching expressions of love and concern. Even Cal Thomas, a very conservative columnist praised Kennedy and talked about how he was praying for him. A

news commentator from Boston talked about how; when a tragedy affected his family that late one night Senator Ted Kennedy was knocking on his door to offer his compassion.

For just a few moments in the news cycle, the news was about the importance of life and what we do with our life instead of endless worries about the latest economic downturn. For just a few moments we were able to get a glimpse of what was really important.

There was another famous person who died this past week. Hamilton Jordon, a leader in the Carter administration died after a long seven year battle with cancer. Jordon didn't use those last years complaining about his bad luck. He used his fame to promote cancer research and he spent his time encouraging others who were struggling with this disease.

He wrote a book entitled, "Every Day is a Good Day." The title was taken from something that happened in one of his visits to the hospital. A young boy was having a particularly hard time with the treatments for cancer. He had lost his hair and was very weak.

Jordon asked the boy, "Are you having a bad day?" And the little boy replied, "Mister, every day is a good day."

That's true not only for a cancer survivor but for all of us. Every day is a good day. Every day is a gift from God and an opportunity to do God's will.

This weekend we're complaining about the cost of gas and the fact that the food for our weekend cookout is going to cost us more. But, we have forgotten the reason we have a holiday this weekend. This is Memorial Day weekend; the time when we remember those who have died in past wars.

Do you think that those who have lost loved ones to past wars would really mind gas being four dollars a gallon or food being a little more expensive if only they had their loved ones back home? But, instead of concentrating on the selfless sacrifices that have been made on our behalf, the headlines zero in on our fears about the future.

And the politicians ... having taken a brief respite from "gotcha politics" are now back in the business of pandering to our worst fears.

Will we never learn the importance of this moment? Will we ever learn that this is the day that the Lord has made, and He wants us to enjoy it and use it wisely?

Jesus told his disciples that the Gentiles, that is, those who were not God's chosen people, were always striving after "these things." In other words it is the nature of those who are not a part of God's people to live life at the mercy of their fears about tomorrow.

But, as disciples of Jesus we are called to live in a different way. Instead of seeking financial security first, last and always, we are to seek the kingdom first, and everything else will fall into place.

That's what we're going to sing about in our next hymn. Jesus said,

“But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. “ Matthew 6:33 (KJV)

Let us commit ourselves to doing just that.

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)