

***Who Do You Trust?***  
**A Sermon on Matthew 6:24-34**  
**Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**February 26, 2017**

**Introduction**

This is one of the most beloved texts in the New Testament about trusting God. It is poetic. His eye is on the sparrow. It is comforting. If God clothes even the lilies of the field, will he not provide for you? Do not be anxious about tomorrow. God will take care of you.

This is likely the longest continuous discourse that can be attributed to the historical Jesus, according to the Jesus Seminar. Among sayings that come from Jesus, some of the parables are longer but none of the discourses.

So this is a foundational text. It reveals to us what Jesus believed about trusting God or having faith in God.

**First Move: Torn Between Two Masters**

Chapter 5 of the Sermon on the Mount is about our relationships with other people. Chapter 6 is about our relationship with God. The lectionary has skipped the first 23 verses of Chapter 6. We hear them on Ash Wednesday. They are about prayer and fasting and alms-giving. At the center of the Sermon on the Mount is the Lord's Prayer, in which Jesus shows us how to pray for God's kingdom.

In today's text, we hear that no one is able to be a slave to two masters. You will inevitably favor one of them. You cannot be a slave to God and Mammon.

This is common sense. You have to have a center of gravity. Your foundation has to be solid. A house divided against itself cannot stand.

Jesus says, do not be anxious about your life. Do not be anxious about what you eat or what you drink or what you wear.

Jesus is directing this speech to the disciples, who have chosen to serve God instead of seeking riches. They may be anxious about how they will be fed if they are not working as farmers and fishermen. They are also anxious about their clothes. Clothes were necessary for warmth but people also used clothes in those days to show their status, by wearing rich luxurious clothes. The rich man who ignored Lazarus at his gates wore linen underwear and purple robes. Today we still make a statement about ourselves by the clothes we wear. The teenager who wears Goth clothing is

making a statement that they are different. The businessman who works a coat and a tie is making a statement that he is a person of authority and is entitled to respect.

Do not be anxious about what you may eat or drink or wear on your body. Jesus makes an argument from the greater to the lesser. God provides for the birds of the sky. The flowers that grow wild in the field neither reap nor sow nor gather into barns, but are they not clothed more magnificently than Solomon in all his glory? Are you not worth more than they?

This text is sometimes misinterpreted as encouraging laziness or being irresponsible. It does no such thing. The challenge to trust in God's providence does not exclude working and having property. The text is directed to people who are sowing, reaping and gathering into barns. Women sow. Men reap crops and gather them into barns. The text is directed to women and men and is intended to reassure them that their work will bear fruit.

People are justifiably anxious about having their basic needs met. Ancient Israel was a subsistence society. Most people were barely getting their basic needs met. More than one third of the people in the world today don't get enough to eat. The hymns about God's eye on the sparrow may sound hollow to them.

This is where the ethical component comes in. In the Bible it is the responsibility of the community to make sure that everyone has enough to eat. This comes from the Torah. Leviticus 25 sets forth holiness codes for protecting the most vulnerable people in society. We see prophets raging against kings because they are violating the holiness codes and neglecting the poor in their community.

Jesus takes the ethical component a step further. The disciples are neither sowing, nor reaping nor gathering into barns. They have left their families and their fields to follow Jesus. They are itinerant evangelists. They are even more food insecure than the people of Israel who are working to support themselves.

Jesus tells the disciples that they need to trust that the new community that he is forming will take care of them. Jesus says that being anxious is the opposite of faith. He calls the disciples ones of little faith. If you trust God, then you will trust that God will provide for you while you are doing God's work. The rich young ruler goes away dejected when Jesus tells him to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor, then come and follow him. Peter says, "Lord, we have done this." Jesus reassures the disciples that if they leave brothers and sisters for his name's sake, they will gain one hundred brothers and sisters. The church is a new family. We are all brothers and sisters. We take care of the ministers and missionaries who do God's work.

Jesus is comforting the disciples who have been proclaiming the kingdom and have abandoned their professions. He has been making a lot of ethical demands on the disciples and called it a higher righteousness: give to anyone who asks from you, if a creditor asks for your tunic or undershirt, give him your outer cloak as well. He reassures them that God will give you whatever is truly necessary to accomplish the tasks that God has given you. God will provide for their material needs through the new community. God will also provide meaning for their lives by allowing the disciples to connect with something bigger than themselves.

## **Second Move: Trusting in Mammon**

So do we have to become itinerant evangelists to take any comfort in this text? Do you have to give up your day job and become a minister or a missionary?

Not if we consider the spiritual dimension of the text. As I suggested in my last sermon, a higher righteousness can also be interpreted as a higher spirituality.

Our material needs are taken care of. No one here today is worried about where their next meal is coming from or what they will wear tomorrow or where they will sleep. It is our spiritual needs that we are or should be most concerned about.

Aaron Gale, a Jewish scholar, says that Mammon is a Semitic word that came to mean riches, but originally meant trust or reliance. It meant, “that in which [other than God] one places one’s trust.” Mammon is a symbol for whatever it is, besides God, that we put ultimate trust in.

The choice most people make is to rely upon themselves. That is where their trust ultimately lies. Be self-sufficient. Look out for Number One. Mammon, if we translate it as riches or possessions, symbolizes that. The goal of many people today is to generate enough wealth to ensure that they will have financial security. Pay off all your bills and save for retirement. Then you will be safe.

The problem is, many people find that wealth alone is not enough for security. Even if you start saving for retirement when you are in your 20's and build up your retirement account to a million dollars [which is what financial planners recommend today if you want to maintain the same lifestyle in retirement], you can get cancer when you are 55. Your medical bills can wipe out your savings. You can still lose your life or the life of a loved one in a car accident. You can still get injured or disabled or die young.

The uncertainty of life causes people to worry. The Old Testament sometimes compares human life to the grass of the field, to emphasize how short our lives are in comparison to God’s eternal reign. The Psalmist laments:

As for mortals their days are like grass,  
they flourish like a flower of the field,  
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,  
and its place knows it no more.

Psalm 103:15-16.

The Psalm goes on to contrast the ephemerality of humans with the eternity of God: “But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.”

If God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and thrown in the oven tomorrow, will not God also clothe you? There was a shortage of wood in ancient Israel, so grass was thrown into ovens to serve as fuel. We cannot find meaning in life by relying on ourselves, especially our wealth. Any security that you find by relying on yourself will be illusory. We find meaning outside ourselves.

We should read this passage as poetry instead of prose. The sparrows and the lilies of the field are symbols for the least of these. God cares for the least of these; God also cares about you. Mammon doesn't care about us. Mammon is a symbol for self-interest. Mammon is greedy and never satisfied. Whatever stuff we accumulate, a library of books or a fully-loaded truck or a beautiful home, does not fulfill us.

We are like the Gentiles. They seek Mammon; they are focused on what to eat and what to drink and what to wear. And they are still anxious.

### **Third Move: Trusting in God**

The focal point of this text, and the climax of Chapter 6, is a new commandment: Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you. That will connect you with the steadfast love of the Lord, which is from everlasting to everlasting. John Dear says that this is a single-minded vision of life as the pursuit of the kingdom of God.

The Sermon on the Mount has been telling us how to seek the kingdom and God's righteousness.

Chapter 5 tells us what God is like and that we should imitate God. Be merciful as God is merciful. Be pure in heart, have single-minded devotion to God, for then you will see God. Be peacemakers, for you will be called sons of God. Love your enemies and pray to God on behalf of the ones who are persecuting you, for in this way you become sons of your father in the heavens, for he raises his sun on the evil and the good and causes the rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Chapter 6 is about how to seek God through prayer and humility. When you are praying, go into your closet, shut the door and pray to your father in secret. Do not babble as the Gentiles do, but pray for God's kingdom to come. Forgive others, as

God forgives you. When you are giving alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Give alms in secret. When you are fasting, pour oil on your head and wash your face, so that men will not know that you are fasting, but only your father in heaven will know.

Evagrius, a theologian in Egypt in the fourth century, who was one of the favorite theologians of the desert fathers, sums it up: “To go against self is the beginning of salvation.” The self is Mammon. What is separating us from God is our own will. We are more concerned about gratifying our thoughts and desires than we are about connecting with God.

Centering prayer is a spiritual practice that helps us control our thoughts and open ourselves up to God. It is a form of kenotic prayer. Kenosis means emptying ourselves as Christ emptied himself of power and self-will, even though he was in the form of God. Our model is Christ’s prayer at Gethsemane. “Yet, not what I want, but what you want.”

Centering prayer is like meditation, except that we don’t focus on anything. It is a matter of intention rather than attention. We try to clear our mind of all thoughts. We try to see nothing and feel nothing except a naked intention toward God. It is a prayer that comes from our heart not our head. Our heart tries to open itself up to God.

It is hard to do. Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal priest who is one of the leaders in the centering prayer movement, says that centering prayer is a return to God. We let go of the smaller, self-centered states of consciousness and move into an open, diffuse awareness. We have expanded our awareness, our presence before God makes itself known.

Bourgeault’s mentor is Father Thomas Keating, who has been leading workshops on centering prayer for the last 40 years. In one of his earliest workshops, a nun tried to do centering prayer for 20 minutes and said, “Oh, Father Thomas, I’m such a failure at this prayer. In 20 minutes I’ve had ten thousand thoughts.”

“How lovely,” said Keating. “Ten thousand opportunities to return to God.”

We carry the attitude of centering prayer with us when we return to our active lives. It makes it easier for us to set our own thoughts and desires aside when we encounter other people. If someone is hostile to us, we are less likely to feel that our pride is wounded and defend ourselves. We are willing to say, “What’s wrong? Why do you feel that way?” We may actually make an emotional connection with that person and melt their hostility. We will be a peacemaker.

## **Conclusion**

Don't be anxious. That is next to impossible if we rely on ourselves. We will never find the security we are looking for. First seek the kingdom and God's righteousness, then it will be added unto us.

God's eye is on the sparrow. God's eye is on us, too. God loves us even more than God loves the sparrow. We will feel that love when we start trusting God instead of Mammon.

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