

Richmond Hill
 Richmond, Virginia
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 8 Epiphany
 Matthew 6:24-34

A new look at faith

“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. (*Matthew 6:24-34*)

Tonight’s Gospel is Jesus’ wonderful, engaging invitation to contemplate the flowers in a field or garden, as a way of stepping out of the anxiety with which human life is so deeply infected. “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow,” he says in King James’ English. “They toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”

The passage is a striking challenge, both to thought and to spiritual practice. At the level of thought, the disciples are enjoined to reflect on the created order, and see the way in which it is both dependent upon its Creator and provided for. At the level of spiritual practice, they are invited to spend time in meditation upon nature as a way of alleviating anxiety.

But there is something else about this teaching from the Sermon on the Mount which I would like to discuss with you tonight, and it comes from the first verse of the assigned reading – the proverb which precedes the description of the lilies and the birds: Jesus says, “No man can serve two masters!”

You cannot serve two masters; for you will either hate the one and love the other, or hold firmly to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

It seems like this sentence is separate from the story that follows – about the lilies of the field – but tonight I'd like to look at the very definite possibility that it isn't – that the connection between this sentence and the story that follows originated with Jesus himself, and that there's a reason they are next to each other.

Taken together, the two passages tell us something very definite about faith.

1. Faith is a yes-no proposition; you cannot serve two masters.
2. It is like loving, holding firmly, and seeking.
3. Its opposite is anxiety and the pursuit of security through wealth.

1. Faith is a yes-no proposition; you cannot serve two masters.

Faith in God is a yes-no proposition. It is sometimes difficult, and its detail varies by the situation, but it is never complex.

Jesus' teaching tonight tries to make that clear. You can't serve two masters. It is the one or the other. If you love one, you will hate the other. If you cling to one, you will reject the other.

There are other definitions of faith. Usually, they have to do with creedal affirmations, such as believing that Jesus is the Son of God. There are things we may believe are true about God, about eternal life or life after death, and so on. But what I am talking about now is faith itself. I'm talking about the thing that gets you up in the morning. I am talking about functioning belief in God, in life, in the goodness of God, in the resurrection. When you see it you know what it is.

It is either there or it isn't.

That's an important thing for you and me to know. It doesn't mean that faith is without doubt – if faith weren't stated in the context of doubt, we wouldn't need faith at all. But faith is a way of knowing something that cannot be known in any other way. It is a way of seeing in places – like the next moment – where our senses cannot see.

Faith is a decision in a moment, like an employee's decision about which person is his boss, or a slave's clarity about who his master is. You can't serve two masters because the one may contradict what the other is saying – and you can't be in two places at one time. That's the way it is with faith in God, Jesus says. Over and over again, we find it is a choice, a yes-no proposition.

Faith is like choosing between two masters. And the difference in holding on to God is momentous.

2. Faith is like loving, holding firmly, and seeking.

Jesus uses the example of a slave who ends up loving one master and hating the other; or who ends up holding firmly to the one and almost loathing the other. These are two forms of human attraction and rejection – love and loyalty – and neither can be divided.

Faith is like love and loyalty. And it is like seeking. When Jesus talks about the life of faith, he opposes the anxiety about life not to some form of certitude, but to seeking. That is, he does not remove the questions and uncertainty, the challenge, from life, but advocates a different behavior in the face of the challenge. The challenge of life is there. It offers you two masters: faith and fear. Choose one.

The behavior which we have chosen to call faith, is given several analogies in tonight's Gospel: loving, being loyal, and seeking.

All are active, and all represent a choice. All open the possibility of further learning – all invite watching. The lover seeks to know what the beloved is doing. The loyal person is looking for direction. And the one who is seeking is always learning. All three of these activities, then, represent the choice of faith.

They also say a lot about the master. This is a master who invites love, and loyalty, and seeking – not fear. These are acts of hope, not despair or depression. Perhaps you have discovered a kind of a switch you can flick within yourself – a place where you sometimes find this choice to be offered. Perhaps you find an invitation, an invitation to seeking God and his kingdom – to trying to find out more about what he is doing and about what can now be done. These are the choices of faith.

- Faith is a yes-no proposition; you cannot serve two masters.
- It is like loving, holding firmly, and seeking.

3. The opposite of faith is anxiety and the pursuit of security through wealth.

You can't serve two masters. One causes anxiety. The other invites you to seek the kingdom and true goodness. You can't serve both, and over and over again we try to do so.

What causes the anxiety about which Jesus is speaking? Well, of course, there are plenty of things – and there is a lot worth being worried about. In fact, these are all things which we need to be concerned about: “what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.”

But they can come to us as seeking, or they can come to us as anxiety. Converting anxiety to seeking the kingdom is the simple and single act of faith. Living the life of anxiety is giving ourselves over to mammon – to the god who says that wealth – and the fear that is wealth's greatest weapon – is the answer. When you seek the kingdom, you deal with many of the same issues that you would deal with if you were

being captured with the anxiety of the other master, but life is completely different. For one thing, there is another whole agenda of which your needs are only a small part. Something else is going on. Life has meaning because it is in the discovery of God and God's history. You still eat and wear clothes.

But nobody can serve two masters. If you are in the business of serving mammon, your anxiety will be eternal. There is no resting place for those who are afraid in this way. You can accumulate wealth, but it never stops.

Many of you have heard the anecdote about the great banker J. P. Morgan, who was asked by someone, "Mr. Morgan, how much wealth is enough?" "I don't know," the man of money said, "But it's a little bit more than I have."

We live in a society where merchandising insecurity is an art form. As our relationships deteriorate, and as we give up on the justice of the kingdom, people have to have more and more money to protect themselves against what might happen. There is an insanity here, and it will destroy both yourself and others.

The antidote to anxiety is not stuffing your fears or accumulating wealth. Whatever you do will go on forever until you stop it and do something else. Your faith and seeking will be a living faith and seeking the kingdom, or your anxiety will be a living anxiety, never pacified. It is an activity of the spirit. This is why it is so dangerous to stifle questions in the name of faith, because faith is an active seeking.

What makes you anxious? I was dealing with a situation the other day in which there is an extremely hostile person in a situation I have to deal with. I get tense when I hear the person or see the person. For several hours I was preoccupied with this feeling – I couldn't get away from it. I was in the grips of it, you could say. Fear, anxiety – you can't ignore it and pretend you don't feel it – it kept coming back.

But no man can serve two masters. I thought I was seeking the kingdom by being at odds with this person, but the master I was serving was the fear – and the fear was the power of darkness. As I became aware of that, I decided to serve the other master. It hasn't changed my alertness vis-à-vis the person we were talking about. But it changed the agenda and intention of my day.

Serving that anxiety is not simply being concerned with survival – it is taking the devil's bait.

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- It is like loving, holding firmly, and seeking.
- Its opposite is anxiety and the pursuit of security through wealth.

You cannot serve two masters; for you will either hate the one and love the other, or hold firmly to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

AMEN.