

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“A Hold on Our Hearts”

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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.

This past week the airwaves and internet were filled with lots of news about shortages. Reports from east Africa and North Korea told us what we probably already knew. Yet the news was stark and the photographs were graphic. Food is in short supply there and people are dying because of the desperate need. This week I heard something else I already knew. There is a shortage of nurses in our country. Such a shortage presents a serious challenge as our society seeks to care for aging baby boomers. Because I am one of those aging boomers, I worry about whether there will be somebody to take care of me. This week I also learned that there is a shortage of certain drugs among those who need them, 209 different drugs to be specific. These medications are particularly needed for cancer treatment and to fight infections which have proven to be resistant to normal antibiotics.

On a less serious note I learned this week that there is a shortage of the newest Apple iPhone, I believe it is called the 4S. People are buying these things up so fast that they cannot keep them in the Apple Stores. Since I am not one to keep up with the latest in technology, I am not quite as concerned about that particular scarcity.

And just in case you were running out of things to worry about this Halloween, most of the eastern and Midwestern United States is facing a major shortage of pumpkins. Severe weather, a fungus outbreak, and hoarding by “pumpkin profiteers” have driven up the price, dwindled the supply, and have had a serious financial impact on farmers and tourist attractions built around pumpkin picking. We are living through the Great Pumpkin Shortage of 2011. Again, since my girls are past the age of jack-o-lantern carving and I dislike pumpkin pie, this shortage will not affect me personally.

We live in a world where scarcity is much in our thoughts. Each time we fill up our gas tanks we might wonder how long the supply of petroleum can last, especially with more and more people in our world demanding it. We know that the demand certainly affects the price. Even though we live in a state surrounded by the Great Lakes, fresh water is becoming a less plentiful commodity. Drought and continued development of land have increased the demand for water in more places. There are real fears of food shortages, not only in third world countries, but in western nations. You might recall the rice shortage of a year ago when places like Sam's Club and Costco were limiting purchases to one bag of rice per customer. Of course those without money to buy available food already know that the shelves of the local food pantry are bare. It seems the economic crisis has created another shortage.

"Don't worry," said Jesus. "It will not add a single moment to your life." Rationally we understand that worry about the future doesn't prepare us well for that future and makes the present less enjoyable. But worry is an easy thing and letting go of worry is a more difficult thing to do.

So what do we worry about? Our health. The health of a loved one. Our checkbook balances. Our retirement accounts. Our children and their performance at school. The safety of our loved ones. The future of our nation. But most of the time our worry is about whether or not we will have enough. Are we loved enough? Do we have enough food to eat and clothes to wear? Will we have enough money for bikes and braces and tuition? Will we have enough time to do what we want before we die? Will we have what we need of anything to meet whatever it is that comes our way? And Jesus says, "Don't worry. God provides for the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. Surely God will provide for you."

Our anxiety about the scarcity of our time and talent and treasure reflects in our stewardship of God's gifts. When we consider what we might offer of our blessings to the service of God, we become slaves to worry.

We hang on to that which we have because we fear that we may have need of it soon. We share of our blessing after we are comfortable that we have enough to care for ourselves.

We plan with caution, restricting our vision to the limits of our perceived resources. We don't want to commit ourselves to something that would demand more than what we have.

We act based on scarcity, failing to risk what is important in the present moment because we are concerned about having what might be needed for next tomorrow. We all plan to be more charitable in the future. We have good intentions. But at the moment we are worried about what we need and what we have and we spend our time and money and energy securing our necessities.

Rev. Mark Perryman reports that he heard a missionary friend speak of their ministry to people in rural Mexico. The missionary said that he was having a difficult time because the people of the village had what he called a "scarcity mentality." They believed that most of life's valuable resources were scarce and it affected their whole lives. For example, most of the parents in the village would have only one child. They believed that two children would split their love in half. They worried about being able to love more than one child. And the concern was also practical. Was there going to be enough room in the house, food on the table, and clothes in the closet for more than one child? There was only one pie and the more people in the family you had, the smaller the pieces of pie for each are available. The missionary was finding it hard to reach the people with the Gospel because their view of scarcity and fear or not having enough ran counter to the message he was trying to present, the message of God's abundant extravagant love poured out upon each and every person.

Jesus' words were part of his Sermon on the Mount, lessons taught on how to live life in a new world created by God's love. This sermon truly is the gospel, the good news that defines how the life of faith in the Kingdom of God is different than a life lived within the human empire. Jesus reminds his followers, and each and every one of us, of God's profound love for everything and everyone that God has created. He encourages his followers, and each and

every one of us, not to spend our time worrying about our worldly security. We are to use what God has given us in ways that serve the Kingdom of God, trusting that there will always be a stream of abundant mercy and grace available from God.

I read this week about a church that had a mission budget of only \$500. Like our church, the budget was tight and this discouraged the congregation's mission committee. They assumed they couldn't do much until they raised more money for their mission efforts. But a couple of the members decided to do something anyway. They collected food for Thanksgiving meals for five families. They adopted other families and gave them Christmas presents. They served a monthly meal at a local soup kitchen. They bought plastic eggs and hosted an Easter egg hunt. They spent an afternoon picking up trash on a local freeway. They hosted a worship service at a local retirement residence. They wrote cards to people in the hospital or who were sick at home. At the end of the church year, the mission committee gathered to see how much money they had left. They discovered that there was \$2000 in their account. Operating in faith, they had been blessed by God's abundance.

Jesus' words really speak to the heart of Christian stewardship. It isn't about what the church needs. It is easy to approach giving in this manner. It speaks to our logic and it serves to meet the bottom line. But it doesn't mirror how God gives to us. This kind of giving tends to lead to reflecting on minimums, using what is left over, giving simply to meet the minimum budget requirements. As a result the church's ministry tends to be cautious and anxious, operating from scarcity rather than abundance.

While this church has a mortgage and salaries and utilities and benevolence commitments to pay, we must trust that if we are faithful to God's intention and if we seek to serve God's purpose here, those basic things will be cared for. In turn we as God's people must understand stewardship to be a spiritual issue, not a financial one. When we allow our resources of time and treasure and talent to follow God's example of abundant giving, we will find ourselves changing in commitment and priority.

Stewardship then is an act of faith. It is a pronouncement of that which has a hold on our hearts. Proper stewardship should be done without worry of scarcity. Stewardship recognizes and celebrates our dependence upon God's graceful abundance. Stewardship moves us to give as God does, and to care for others and our world in the same manner that God cares for us.