

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Who’s Your Master?”

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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? ²⁶Look 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? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But 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? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But 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.

Preacher Leonard Sweet tells the story of Kais Rayes. He and his wife found their life turned completely upside down when their first child arrived. Every night the baby seemed to be fussy, and many night it seemed that the child cried far more hours than he slept. Rayes said, “My wife would wake me up saying, ‘Get up honey! Go see why the baby is crying!’” As a result Rayes found himself suffering from severe sleep deprivation. While complaining to his colleagues at work one day, Rayes receives the suggestion of consulting a book on infant massage. He immediately went in search of the book and that very night tried the technique, gently rubbing his baby’s back, arms, head, and legs until the baby was completely relaxed and obviously had fallen into a deep sleep. Quietly tiptoeing from the darkened room so as not to disturb the rhythmic breathing of the baby, he made his way directly to his own bed in hope of enjoying a well deserved full night of sleep. No such luck. In the middle of the night, his wife awoke him in a panic. “Get up honey!” she said as she jostled him awake. “Go see why the baby is not crying!”

Last Sunday I arrived home from church around 1:30 or so in the afternoon. I changed out of my suit and tie into a much more comfortable jeans and sweatshirt. I made my weekly phone call to my father to check up on everything in his life. I made a quick lunch to eat while watching television. And finally I settled into my easy chair in my Tiger Den to watch the Detroit Red Wings play. It was time to relax in comfort. I was looking forward to a couple of hours away from any kind of worry or commitment.

As I turned the game on, the first period had already been completed. Channel 4, who was carrying the game, broke away from the regular network intermission show to give us viewers an update on the approaching winter storm here in Southeast Michigan. They told me that they had declared the day a Severe Weather Alert Day and promised me that they would provide me with whatever information I needed to keep me and my family safe during the storm. Right away my anxiety level was turned up a few notches.

The meteorologist outlined in detail what kind of weather we could expect in the next 24 hours. First, there would be heavy snow turning the roads into a sheet of ice, almost white out conditions, with near zero visibility. I was on edge knowing Laura was in Dearborn doing an insulin pump training, and would have to drive home later in the afternoon. Next we were told that there would be a wintry mix falling from the skies, and for the area in which we are living that would mean freezing rain, and lots of it, between a quarter to half an inch of ice. Then the winds would pick up, knocking down tree limbs and power lines and causing power outages. The meteorologist then told us that now was the time to prepare for what might happen. We needed candles. We needed flashlights. We needed batteries for our flashlight and radios. We needed bottled water. We needed canned goods. We needed to charge our cell phones. We needed to make certain that there was ample supply of gasoline in our cars. We needed shovels to move the snow. We needed salt to melt the ice.

Yikes, I gulped. I certainly wasn't ready for that. How could I be so unprepared? And what was I doing sitting down and watching a hockey game? All of a sudden I started thinking about everything that I needed to do to get ready for the storm. Where were the candles and flashlights and batteries and the bottled water? And was my cell phone charged and how much gasoline did I have in my car? How could I sit and enjoy this meaningless hockey game when there was so much other important stuff to do? How could I relax in my easy chair when I needed to be worrying about what was going to happen in my driveway and on my power lines in just a matter of hours? If you know me, you know that I tend to be a worrier anyway. Channel 4's Severe Weather Alert Day had opened the cage and set the worrier on the rampage!

This week I read an anonymous article on anxiety. It wasn't a scientific study but more of writing containing some practical advice. It said that 40% of an average person's worry is focused on things that will never happen. Around 30% is of worry in about things in the past that can't be changed. Around 12% is about criticism from others, things that are mostly untrue. Nearly 10% of all worry is about one's health, and it is the kind of worry that gets worse with stress. Finally it is estimated that 8% of all worry is about real problems that we will have to face.

We continue our Epiphany-long study of Jesus' major teaching from the gospel of Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount. Following the odd series of blessings known as the Beatitudes, Jesus began a list of new commandments and guidelines for those who would part of his new reign, the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Jesus says, "No one can serve two masters. He or she will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other." At first glance, the conflict of the slave appears to be specifically limited to a discussion of wealth or money. Yet Jesus goes on to tell us that we should not be anxious. He speaks of the anxiety caused by material things, worry about food and drink and what we might wear. He goes on to ask us to consider the flowers of the field and the birds of the air, like us God's creatures, but creatures who seem not to be ruled with anxiety about material things. God did not just create the universe and then abandon it to whatever fate it would find. God is there and God is intimately concerned with each and every creature.

Jesus seems to link our worry about the concerns of life with the concept of slavery. Whom do you serve? Who is your master? It is those things which we worry about that set our priorities and determine our choices. And those things which have control over us are the things that make us most anxious.

We worry about the economy. We work extra hours or take a second job rather than spend time with our children and we do it because there are many things we want to buy for them. Many of us lost a great deal of savings during the great recession a couple years ago. Although the economy may be some type of recovery, we know that it and we are still vulnerable to many issues and events beyond our control. I hope everyone noticed the increase in the price of gasoline last Wednesday morning.

We worry about our jobs. Particularly in this area we know that work and lack of work have forced families into difficult choices which take their toll on more than the grocery pantry. Changes and transition due to job loss or adjustment affect self-esteem and personal identity.

We worry about our world. Certainly our planet seems like a small neighborhood and a most unsettled one at that. We wonder how many more conflicts need to be experienced and how many more changes will have to take place before things seem more stable and secure.

We worry about our health, our children, our aging parents, our work responsibilities, and our relationships. Are we doing all that we can be doing to make things right? How can we prepare in our waking hours to make certain that when our heads hit the pillow, we can sleep more at ease?

Jesus' teaching is about trust in God. It is not to say that all birds are adequately fed and that all lilies are as beautiful as they can possibly be. It is not to say that we should be lazy and irresponsible in our work and life preparation. It is not to say that our financial problems will all be solved by an unquestioning confidence in God. It is also not to say that there never will be things which will demand our action, our vigilance, and perhaps even our sincere worry.

But Jesus' words are to say that sometimes our almost frantic pursuit of life's necessities and our almost hysterical worry about all of life's possibilities take attention away from the vision of God's blessing in our world and the celebration of God's goodness in the glory of creation. When what we view as life's needs and what we see as potential problems consume all of our time and energy and attention; they become our master. They control us and remove from us all opportunities for joy.

How can we claim that we belong to the Kingdom of God when our actions illustrate the typical worry and anxiety of our world? Jesus merely asks us to consider for what do we are expend our life. For what do we use our time and energy? What controls our decision making and our setting of priorities? Who is our master? We should be the people God created us to be. We should focus on what is important and lasting.