

You Can't Serve God *and* Anything Else.

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.

3rd Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 4, Yr. A. June 1, 2008. (Deuteronomy 11:18-21; Matthew 6:24-34)

When I was in first or second grade in Sunday School, we did a craft activity imitating what Moses told the Israelites to do before they came into the Promised Land. First we took pencils and laboriously copied out on lined paper these words that the teacher had written on a blackboard: *"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might."* Then we folded our paper up really small and put it into a matchbox we'd already decorated with construction paper and strung on a long piece of ribbon. Our teacher tied these little boxes onto our foreheads, telling us that this was to remind us to love God more than anything else. Then we went into the church with our parents.

We were a bunch of little Christian children imitating what our Jewish friends do in obedience to the Law when they wear *tefillin* (phylacteries) – black leather boxes on straps not only around their heads but around one arm. We just read about this in Deuteronomy: *"You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise."*

These is what Moses told God's people to put in their heart and soul, bind on their hands and foreheads, nail to the gateposts of their houses, and teach to their children: *"Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is One. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."* Moses warned them that if they turned away from loving God more than anything else, there would be sad consequences. And we know Moses told the truth: keep your focus on God.

In the Sermon on the Mount, from which we heard last Sunday and now again today, Jesus is speaking just to his disciples – not to the crowds, not to humanity in general. This is wisdom directed to a group of people who've already made what I would call THE most important choice in life – the decision to follow Jesus. He says: *"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."*

This may sound to you like a quaint saying, maybe appropriate to people in the first century but not to us. After all, we live in the age of multitasking. Many of us have worked two or even three jobs at the same time, had two or three bosses, and we've done fine. We liked them all, and working for several employers provided interesting diversity. If that's what you're thinking, let me offer you a different way of hearing what Jesus is saying.

First off, what he's really telling us in effect is: "You're not as independent as you think you are, or as you wish you were. You're not 'the master of your fate and the captain of your soul.'" He's saying, "The truth is that you are going to 'serve' some thing or some one. You're going to be under the influence, the guidance, maybe even the orders of *somebody* or some *force* or some *values* that WILL shape your life. You're free to choose this person or power or value system, so be very careful."

"You cannot serve God and wealth" was not a caution directed just to wealthy people – or even mainly to wealthy people. After all, Jesus was talking to his disciples, and as far as we can tell he didn't have many rich disciples. (There were a few, but very few.) Most of the people who heard the Sermon on the Mount were small businessmen, humble craftsmen, fishermen, farmers, and housewives. There were no plutocrats among them, but there were many only got by from day to day, living hand to mouth.

Jesus is warning about the disease of *materialism*, an affliction that has more to do with our attitudes than our affluence. It's counsel for all of us who live in this world of material necessities – whether we have enough money to indulge our whims or have to pinch pennies, and whether we drive a Ferrari or a Ford. It's about getting our priorities in order. This applies to the rock star and the grocery clerk in equal measure. Materialism isn't only the rock star's insatiable craving for more and more toys – another yacht, another jet plane, another villa on the Riviera. It's also the grocery clerk's pervasive fear of never having enough – enough to pay the rent, enough to pay the dentist, enough to put gas in the Ford. Materialism is a distortion of values and a reversal of priorities. It is myopic and “this world” centered, ignoring the place of God in the universe and our mission as servants of God.

You can't serve God AND anything else. You can't serve God and the accumulation of more toys —or even God and the bare necessities. You can't serve God and your own ego. You can't serve God and the pursuit of power ...or entertainment ...or even a better job. Be careful about what worries you, consumes your energy, and is the subject of your nightmares, because – whatever that is – it can quickly become your master. And “*No one can serve two masters.*”

Write this on your heart, on your arm, on the gatepost of your house: “*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might.*” Love the LORD, serve only him, and “*Do not worry about tomorrow.*” A friend of mine says that people who worry think they're doing something useful: “Don't bother me, I'm busy worrying!” Jesus doesn't say not to think and plan for the future. He doesn't say not to be prudent. What he DOES say is not to worry. When we worry, we obsess about things that are beyond our control. We lose sleep over potential problems and possible disasters. And we forget that Jesus has promised to be with us always, even to the end of the ages.

If you find yourself consumed by worries, listen to what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount.

- First: Get your priorities right. “*Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.*” One author I read this week said, Jesus didn't say to “strive ONLY for the kingdom of God” but to work for God's kingdom first. When you put God first, other things that should rightfully concern you will fall into their proper places.
- The second is related to the first: Invest your effort where you can really make a difference. “*Can any of you by worrying add a single day to your span of life?*” Worrying drains your energy. That's why people who worry think they're actually accomplishing something – they're tired all the time! There's only so much you can accomplish in a day or a year or a lifetime. You have a finite amount of energy, and you need to direct your energy into projects that have the potential to bear fruit, projects chosen according to God's priorities.
- Third: Live one day at a time. “*Today's trouble is enough for today.*” In the real world, bad things *do* happen to God's people. Christians lose their jobs, contract diseases, and have problems in their marriages at about the same rate as everybody else. But Christians know that “*in all things God works for good for those who love him.*” So we face today's troubles today, sleep peacefully tonight, and expect that the Lord will be there for us when we have to face whatever tomorrow may bring.