

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany

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St. Paul's Lutheran Church, 2958 - 59th St., Sacramento, CA 95817
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Matthew 6:24-34 24No 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.

25Therefore 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.

34So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today. (NRSV)

YOU CAN'T DO A DON'T

May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. (2 Peter 1:2)

You can't do a don't. I know that sounds almost like a dare -- I dare you to try it -- but psychologically that is a true statement. You are aware that I studied psychology, and I think I know what I'm saying here. OK, listen to me now -- don't you dare think about red apples! You and I live more in our sub-conscious mind that we realize, and it is a demonstrated fact that our sub-conscious (not our un-conscious) our sub-conscious mind doesn't understand a negative. Psychologists in the field of hypnosis say this: **Research is absolute on this...The subconscious mind CANNOT recognize a negative command. And so, anytime you use a statement that includes a negative command, you are actually giving the OPPOSITE command for the action or results you desire!**

For example, and I've seen this countless times: one of my golfing buddies will say, "I don't want to hit this into the water;" and they promptly dump their ball in the pond; or "I don't want to hit it right..." and they sure 'nuff, hit it out of bounds, to the right." Then they'll exclaim, "I didn't want to do that! And I have on occasion calmly said, "You can't do a don't."

Well?! Did Jesus understand that psychological impossibility? Twice in today's text he says, "Do not worry," and there it is on the front of our bulletin cover in big words, "Do not worry." Is this Jesus just a new Moses? After all, Moses went up on the mountain of Sinai to receive the Laws of the Ten Commands! And of Jesus, here in Mt. 5:1, it is said that he went up the mountain, sat down, and began to speak -- this is his "Sermon on the Mount." Is He the new law-giver speaking from his own mountain?? as some theologians have said.? Let's examine our Lord's words today from a law/gospel viewpoint. I see a contrast here between two masters: Part 1.) Master Law has his "do's" & "don'ts"; but Part 2.) our True Master is giving us promises.

Part I: Master Law has his "do's" & "don'ts"

1. **We have worries and fears aplenty.** We know we shouldn't worry. And it doesn't help to worry. We are even told it can hurt our mental and physical health. But still we worry. About what? You name it. Jesus said, ***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.*** We have more than enough to eat and to drink and to wear but still find plenty to be anxious about. Will the job market come back for baby-boomers & will there be any Social Security funds for them or for their children? How will the demonstrations for democracy in the Middle East affect us here? How will things turn out in Wisconsin? Will my investments & money carry me to the end of my life, etc.

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2. **Our worries show our lack of trust.** Well, that's not completely true -- we **do** tend to trust what Jesus here calls "Mammon" more than we trust God's promises. Jesus said, **"... 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?"** Oh, oh, Jesus is calling us names -- "Little faiths", He calls us. Yes, He sees right into our hearts and knows what or who we really trust. In the Layman's Bible Commentaries, the author for the book of Matthew writes, **"No one ever unmasked the power of money and the fascination it holds for {people} as did Jesus."** The very word for money or "wealth" that Jesus uses here is more like our phrase, 'net worth', and comes from an Aramaic root, MN, (Mem, Nun) which means, 'that on which we rely.' So if we now say, "Oh, I don't trust in my money," I would have to say "Are you sure you can do that 'don't'?"

3. **If Mammon is our master, where will we end up?** Our Lord sees in Mammon a demon power which holds us under diabolical control. If money and wealth control us, we are no longer under the ownership of our Original Master, our Creator and Preserver, and He says to us, "If you want Mammon as your master, then you can have Mammon, but you won't have me—and you will end up with nothing but rusty, moth-eaten stuff." And that means the absolute end of us, an eternal end apart from God.

All right, so far we agree that 1.) **We have worries and fears aplenty.** 2.) **Our worries show our lack of trust.** And 3.) **If Mammon is our master, where we will end up is not good!** Nevertheless there is good news --

Part II. Our True Master is giving us gracious promises

1.) **Our True Master watches over us.** Let me tell you a story. It's not my story, it's a story by the man we might call the patriarch of all the Lutherans in the U.S., Pastor Henry Melchior Mühlberg, who came to America in Sept. 1742, landing in Charleston, S.C. 34 years before our Independence from England, and became the principal organizer of American Lutherans.

By the way, one of his sons, Frederick, became a Lutheran pastor like his father, and then in 1776 he was the very first signer of the By-laws to the U.S. constitution. He also became the very first Speaker of the House in the U.S. Congress.

Now Pastor Henry wrote, **"This summer I beheld a scene ... at my small dwelling place. A scrawny, unattractive hen, or pullet, laid eleven eggs in a hidden place amid a great cackling. For several weeks the hen sat on the eggs, suffering hunger and thirst and hardly taking a few minutes during the day to search for food in order to preserve life. Finally the little creature came out and brought eleven chicks to my door and asked for feed for her helpless offspring. She broke the bread for her young ones, warmed them at her breast, protected them against storms, warned them when she spied a bird of prey from afar, drew them after her when she wished to [take a walk], fought men and strong beasts who approached too near to her young ones, cut a figure with her wings as if she were wearing a hoop skirt, and brought her young ones to my door or under my window five or six times a day and asked me to feed them."** Wouldn't you agree that's a beautiful word-picture of how God cares for us, if we take parson Henry, the story-teller, for the Heavenly father, and we as the mother hen & chicks? Yes, our True Master watches over us.

But wait, now you'll hear, what Paul Harvey used to call, "the rest of the story." Pastor Mühlberg continues, **"When the young ones had grown enough to help themselves, there was not one among them which showed enough gratitude to bring the mother a kernel of corn or share a chance crumb. Moreover, the mother ceased calling them, became quiet, modest, shy, and timid, and withdrew into solitude."** [For All the Saints, Vol. I, p. 410] Now the metaphor of the eleven chicks is not as endearing. It could be the picture, not only of the offspring of any of us, but a picture of we ourselves who forget the One who gave us birth.

You see, that One Who saw to our physical birth, our Maker, our Creator God, is also our Redeemer in the second Person of the Holy Trinity. In the waters of Holy Baptism He brought us forth by the Word of Truth, that Word of the cross which proclaims the death of the Son of God for

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us. Now that Word calls us to return and give thanks. It is our Lord Jesus here on this mountain who calls us to seek first the Kingdom of God, that is, seek to have God's gracious kingship or rulership in our hearts, and seek His righteousness, that is, that right standing, that cloak of purity which is really His promise, His gift to us.

2. **By His gift our "little faith" turns into "great faith."** St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, ch 2: ***"8For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this [faith] is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (ESV)*** By trusting His promise that the Kingdom is His gift for us, we little chickens become more and more what God wants us to be. We are able to see the positives in our Lord's sermon here. E.g., He says, v. 26, ***"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?"*** He also said, v. 28, ***"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." ... will he not much more clothe you? (NRSV)*** This is not just the "power of positive thinking" -- a phrase made famous by Pr. Norman Vincent Peale -- but encouragement by our Lord to trust the One who called us out of darkness into His glorious light.

I should hasten to say that it would be a distortion of this beautiful passage to be tempted to give up our jobs -- to let the other guy do it -- to expect everything from God without doing any work. St. Paul saw that problem in the church in Thessalonika. He wrote in his second letter to the Thessalonians, ch. 3, Now brothers and sisters ***"... 10when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. 11For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. 12Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living."*** (ESV) Note, "... if anyone is not **willing** to work" He's not talking about those who are not able to work -- we need to have a social safety net for the weakest among us.

3. **So what have we learned about positives and negatives?** I think that our Lord knew we could not do a "don't." He tells us, ***"Do not Worry ..."*** in order to alert us to the impossibility of that very thing, the impossibility of doing everything just right. ***"Do not Worry ..."*** is a Law saying that accuses us, and that's what the Law of God is always doing -- accusing us of our sins. Jesus is not a new lawgiver on his mountain, but our Savior who encourages us to believe the Good News of God's protective and redemptive care. **By His gift on the cross our "little faith" turns into "great faith"** which we feed and nourish as we come to this Holy Table. He loves us as we are, and calls upon us to work the works of Him who sent us while it is day, before the night comes when no one can work. It is our privilege to get to do the "do's" of the Master, and Jesus said, ***"indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things"*** -- in order to be able to do our serving.

34So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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