

Stewardship 4
Acts 4:32-37
Matthew 6:19-29
October 28, 2007

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
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Notes not for publication

I read this gospel text sometimes at weddings—"do not worry." But I normally end the reading right before that last verse, because it's a bit of a downer. "Tomorrow will bring worries of its own; today's trouble is enough for today." An appropriate message perhaps, for a newly married couple, but not generally what they got all dressed up to come and hear the preacher say on their special day.

The thing is, we know it's true, don't we? Didn't our mamas teach us not to borrow trouble? It's just common sense, really. Because when we're borrowing trouble from tomorrow, there's a whole lot we're not able to do today. You know how that is, when you get all worked up about something that hasn't happened yet, and might not happen at all—you can use all your energy that way and really have nothing left for the day that actually is happening. This is part of what Jesus means by "today's trouble is enough for today." It's about paying attention to the moment, freeing up your focus, allowing yourself to experience what is.

Funny how some things are true of us humans no matter what the age or culture. John Wesley, the father of Methodism back in the 1700s, explained what he thought Jesus meant when he said, "Do not worry": "What he... condemns is, the care of the heart; the anxious, uneasy care; the care that hath torment; all such care as does hurt, either to the soul or body. What he forbids is, that care which, sad experience shows, wastes the blood and drinks up the spirits; which anticipates all the

misery it fears, and comes to torment us before the time. He forbids only that care which poisons the blessings of to-day, by fear of what may be to-morrow; which cannot enjoy the present plenty, through apprehensions of future want. This care is not only a sore disease, a grievous sickness of soul, but also an heinous offence against God, a sin of the deepest dye. It is a high affront to the gracious Governor and wise Disposer of all things; necessarily implying, that the great Judge does not do right; that he does not order all things well" (John Wesley, Sermon 29, gbgm-umc.org). Indeed.

We worry about things for a lot of reasons. One, though, that I think applies here is that we worry because we know in our hearts that there is a whole lot in our lives that we do not control. To a large extent, the traps we fall into in our lives that suck the energy out of us are an effort to be in control of as much as we possibly can. Do not worry about what you will wear or eat or drink? We are way past that. Those we've got covered, most of the time. So we go on to worry about what we will drive and where we will live and what kind of couch we'll sit on. Sometimes those are a cover for what we're really worried about—how we're going to get somebody to do what we want them to do. Or illness or death or heartbreak or whether people will like us or not. Or whether we will ever finally feel at peace. Most of us in this room have what we need to cover the basics. It's the things we cannot control that keep us up at night.

One of the ways our culture has responded to our own anxiousness about life is to absolutely submerge ourselves in stuff. We are identified by and with our stuff, and many of our lives come to be about stuff management: We buy stuff we like and that

we think will make us happy. We bring it home and remember that we already have a lot of stuff there, so we have to either move some of it around or put it in the garage for the thrift store, or if we're collectors of stuff, we might decide we need another room or a bigger house. And then we need to go a store dedicated to helping us keep our stuff, like The Container Store, and we buy some stuff to put our stuff in. And then we might decide to put some extra stuff in boxes and store them in the attic, never to be seen again. Now, I have some glasses that belonged to my grandparents, and I found them in their attic, wrapped in newspaper dated 1945. So sometimes somebody will cash in on that kind of storage, but it's generally not going to be the person who stored it.

I sometimes watch the shows on TV where they help people either clean out a really messy house or just get things organized. One of the things those shows do with people who are really bad, out-of-control packrats is to help them see how their stuff symbolizes something for them. For some it's an attachment to people who are now gone. For others it's a memory of another time. For still others the piles of belongings are a kind of buffer against life. Sometimes these people cry as they let their stuff be hauled out for a yard sale. Usually the ones who cry are the ones who are going to be able to do something different once the TV cameras leave. The ones who steal their own stuff out of the yard sale and hide it in the trunk of their car can easily end up right back where they started, hip deep in junk. Because they never did address the worry that lies beneath the junk.

Wherever our treasure is, there we will find our hearts. Whatever the treasure

looks like, it's going to have us all intertwined in it, our energy and our attention, and in fact our devotion. And as much as we would like it not to be true, our devotion can only be directed toward one thing at a time. If we pack our hearts up in a box and put it in the attic, our hearts are not available to love God. If our hearts are consumed with what might happen tomorrow, they will miss the gifts and possibilities that surround them today. When we decide to assume the responsibility for seeing to our own fulfillment, we will find ourselves unfulfilled, for that's not a job we're capable of. That doesn't mean we shouldn't seek fulfillment; it means we shouldn't seek it in things we can see and create and control.

This is what it means to serve a master, as Christ puts it. As one writer put it, Jesus is reminding us that human life is not self-sufficient; that we find the meaning of our lives outside ourselves; that human life inescapably 'serves' something that gives it meaning. The choice is not whether we shall serve, but what or whom we will serve" (M. Eugene Borning, *NIB Vol. VII*, p. 210). Where will we invest our energy? Where do we believe we will find completion? Where will our lives find their goal? Whatever the answer, there is only room in us to trust one thing at a time to do that for us.

(Devotional reading)

So how do we learn to trust God like this, to let go of all that clutters our minds and hearts? Some have very hard things happen to them that bring reality home, the transient, inconstant nature of the things we normally cling to. But there are practices we can take on that help keep us pointed in the right direction, seeking to serve God rather than our own whims. One of those Christian practices is gratitude. For to be

truly grateful is to pull ourselves out of the concerns and possessions that we have piled up around us, and to recognize who really gives life. ere real life, real completion comes from.

This last week I attended a training event in California. The day I left, I took a shuttle to the airport, and the guy driving, named Dave, was really tall and big, head shaved, little goatee, and very friendly. He also spoke with a seriously Yankee accent. Turns out he was from New Jersey but had moved west to be near his brother. We talked about how expensive the town was, but that it's a beautiful place to live. He told me that his mother had some sort of problems in her life and had kicked him and his brother out of the house when he was 16. He said he'd been working full time for 10 years, since he was 17. Dave said, "I look around at the mountains and the ocean, I come home from work and sit on the couch that I worked to pay for and watch a movie on TV with my girlfriend, and I don't take any of it for granted. Because I know what it takes to have these things. I know what it's like not to have them." He said, "I know I'm a big guy and all that, but I'm really pretty sentimental, and I'm just really happy with my life."

Though I didn't get a chance to ask whether he saw his life as a gift from God, Dave clearly had a heart of gratitude. He probably had plenty of reasons to worry about the future, having experienced hardship and lack early on and living in a place where a dollar doesn't go very far. He might have even felt driven to accumulate all the stuff he'd been denied as a kid. But he had made the choice to look at what surrounded him as gift, as good, as enough for his needs.

We can do the same, except that we know where the gift has come from. When we make our gifts today, when we commit our money, as representative of who we are, we do so to point ourselves in God's direction. To put a portion of our treasure with God, that our hearts might be there also—what a privilege, what a gift in itself to be able to give in this way! By the grace of God today, may our act of offering spring from grateful, joyful hearts, seeking first the kingdom of God and that righteousness which is love. Do not worry, for you are beloved of God. And in the end, all that we need, God will provide.

The Buddha is quoted as saying: "Let us rise up and be thankful, for if we didn't learn a lot today, at least we learned a little, and if we didn't learn a little, at least we didn't get sick, and if we got sick, at least we didn't die; so, let us all be thankful."
(wisdomquotes.com)

4. Mammon was the name of one of the heathen gods, who was supposed to preside over riches. It is here understood of riches themselves; gold and silver; or, in general, money; and, by a common figure of speech, of all that may be purchased thereby; such as ease, honor, and sensual pleasure.

But what are we here to understand by serving God, and what by serving mammon?

We cannot serve God unless we *believe* in him. This is the only true foundation of serving him. Therefore, believing in God, as "reconciling the world to himself through Christ Jesus," the believing in him, as a loving, pardoning God, is the first great branch of his service.

And thus to believe in God implies, to trust in him as our strength, without whom we can do nothing, who every moment endues us with power from on high, without which it is impossible to please him; as our help, our only help in time of trouble, who compasseth

us about with songs of deliverance; as our shield, our defender, and the lifter up of our head above all our enemies that are round about us.

It implies, to trust in God as our happiness; as the centre of spirits; the only rest of our souls; the only good who is adequate to all our capacities, and sufficient to satisfy all the desires he hath given us.

It implies, (what is nearly allied to the other,) to trust in God as our end; to have an eye to him in all things; to use all things only as means of enjoying him; wheresoever we are, or whatsoever we do, to see him that is invisible, looking on us well-pleased, and to refer all things to him in Christ Jesus.

8. Let us consider now what we are to understand, on the other hand, by serving mammon. And, First, it implies the *trusting* in riches, in money, or the things purchasable thereby, as our strength, -- the means whereby we shall perform whatever cause we have in hand; the trusting in them as our help, -- by which we look to be comforted in or delivered out of trouble.

It implies the trusting in the world for happiness; the supposing that "a man's life," the comfort of his life, "consisteth in the abundance of the things which he possesseth;" the looking for rest in the things that are seen; for content, in outward plenty; the expecting that satisfaction in the things of the world, which can never be found out of God.

And if we do this, we cannot but make the world our end; the ultimate end, if not of all, at least of many, of our undertakings, many of our actions and designs; in which we shall aim only at an increase of wealth, at the obtaining pleasure or praise, at the gaining a larger measure of temporal things, without any reference to things eternal.

12. Does not every man see, that he cannot *comfortably* serve both? That to trim between God and the world is the sure way to be disappointed in both, and to have no rest either in one or the other? How uncomfortable a condition must he be in, who, having the fear but not the love of God, -- who, serving him, but not with all his heart, -- has only the toils and not the joys of religion? He has religion enough to make him miserable, but not enough to make him happy: His religion will not let him enjoy the world, and the world will not let him enjoy God. So that, by halting between both, he loses both; and has no peace either in God or the world.

17. What he here condemns is, the care of the heart; the anxious, uneasy care; the care that hath torment; all such care as does hurt, either to the soul or body. What he forbids is, that care which, sad experience shows, wastes the blood and drinks up the spirits; which anticipates all the misery it fears, and comes to torment us before the time. He forbids only that care which poisons the blessings of to-day, by fear of what may be to-morrow; which cannot enjoy the present plenty, through apprehensions of future want. This care is not only a sore disease, a grievous sickness of soul, but also an heinous offence against God, a sin of the deepest dye. It is a high affront to the gracious

Governor and wise Disposer of all things; necessarily implying, that the great Judge does not do right; that he does not order all things well.

24. "Therefore take no thought for the morrow." Not only, take ye no thought how to lay up treasures on earth, how to increase in worldly substance; take no thought how to procure more food than you can eat, or more raiment than you can put on, or more money than is required from day to day for the plain, reasonable purposes of life; -- but take no uneasy thought, even concerning those things which are absolutely needful for the body. Do not trouble yourself now, with thinking what you shall do at a season which is yet afar off. Perhaps that season will never come; or it will be no concern of yours; -- before then you will have passed through all the waves, and be landed in eternity. All those distant views do not belong to you, who are but a creature of a day. Nay, what have you to do with the morrow, more strictly speaking? Why should you perplex yourself without need? God provides for you to-day what is needful to sustain the life which he hath given you. It is enough: Give yourself up into his hands. If you live another day, he will provide for that also.

(26.) Or perhaps you are now in heaviness of soul: God, as it were, hides his face from you. You see little of the light of his countenance: You cannot taste his redeeming love. In such a temper of mind, how natural is it to say, "O how I will praise God, when the light of his countenance shall be again lifted up upon my soul! How will I exhort others to praise him, when his love is again shed abroad in my heart! Then I will do thus and thus: I will speak for God in all places: I will not be ashamed of the gospel of Christ. Then I will redeem the time: I will use to the uttermost every talent I have received." Do not believe thyself. Thou wilt not do it then, unless thou doest it now. "He that is faithful in that which is little," of whatsoever kind it be, whether it be worldly substance, or the fear or love of God, "will be faithful in that which is much." But if thou now hidest one talent in the earth, thou wilt then hide five: That is, if ever they are given; but there is small reason to expect they ever will. Indeed "unto him that hath," that is, uses what he hath, "shall be given, and he shall have more abundantly. But from him that hath not," that is, uses not the grace which he hath already received, whether in a larger or smaller degree, "shall be taken away even that which he hath."
(John Wesley, Sermon 29, gbgm-umc.org)
