

“Deciding from the Heart”
March 3, 2024

Job 31:24-28
Matthew 6:19-24

“You cannot serve God and wealth.”

Maybe we should have known words such as these were coming.

After all, many find the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount difficult or challenging—so, we might have expected these words that are, well, *difficult and challenging*.

But this Sermon begins with Jesus talking about blessing—about *happiness*—even in the hard times of life. He tells us that we are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world. All that sounds pretty good.

Maybe we let our guard down.

We should have known words such as these were coming.

After all, we’ve listened enough to Jesus and sometimes it seems that he talks about money and possessions almost as much as he talks about God.

As we look for the good news in the Sermon on the Mount this morning, we’re faced with a choice; we’re called to a decision.

No one can serve two masters.

Years ago Dylan told us:

You're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the Devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody

He was perhaps, simply reframing for another time the words of Jesus: What’s is going to be? God or wealth?

It reminds me of the old Jack Benny routine in which he is confronted by a man with a gun.

“This is a stick-up,” the man says. “Your money or your life.”

And Benny is silent.

“Come on,” the man says. “You heard me. Your money or your life.”

And the exasperated Benny says, “I’m thinking it over!”

Listening to Jesus this morning, maybe you feel like you need a little more time as well.

God.

Wealth.

As is usually the case, Jesus is actually confronting us with an even greater decision. His words go beyond money alone.

Amy-Jill Levine tells us that the translation “You cannot serve God and *money*” is “less than helpful.” She reminds us that, while it was written in Greek, Matthew’s Gospel uses the Aramaic word *mammon* here. Yes, it means “wealth,” but over time it has come to suggest greed and even a false object of worship.

Mammon, Levine suggests, sounds somewhat like the name of another *god*. And more than “wealth” or “money” alone, *mammon*, Levine tells us, is pretty much all our *stuff*.

George Carlin once talked at length about the “stuff” that we had, saying that a house is actually just a little place for your stuff, just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. And when you leave your house, Carlin pointed out, “You gotta lock it up. Wouldn’t want somebody to come by and take some of your stuff.”

Wouldn’t want somebody to take some of your *mammon*—your god.

Which brings us to those words of Job. In his attempt to defend himself to his friends and before the living God, Job begins by being very clear that his is a just and righteous person. He cares for others, he feeds the hungry, he clothes the naked, he gives to the poor. He is the kind of person who, as Jesus would say later, “hungers and thirsts for righteousness.”

He does not worship money.

He is not the servant of two masters.

And Job makes it clear that trusting in wealth is as close to idolatry as worshipping the sun and the moon.

That word, *mammon*, comes from a word that means “trust” or “reliance.” It’s as though Jesus is telling us—in that challenging, yet ultimately gracious way that he has—that we just can’t *trust* our *stuff*.ⁱ

Our possessions can possess us. Setting our hearts on what we have, we lose sight of the graciousness of God.

This helps us understand why in the middle of talking about stuff, about *mammon*, Jesus talks about eyesight.

While we think of the eye as “a window that lets light into the body, the common understanding in the ancient world was that the eye was like a lamp—projecting an inner light onto objects so that they can be seen.”ⁱⁱ

Wealth, stuff, *mammon* can distort our vision and warp our values. It can keep us from seeing the image of God in each human being. It can keep us from seeing that the earth is God's. It can keep us from seeing that all that we have is simply entrusted to us for a time—that we are, in the end, only *stewards* of many good gifts—none of which will last forever, none of which will be ours forever.

Jesus is not calling his followers to poverty. He is inviting us to clear sight.

Diane Komp was a pediatric oncologist at Yale--she treated children with cancer. Talking about parents who had a child with a terminal illness, she said:

“I have asked them, ‘If you were going to rewrite the story of your life, would you wipe out any memory of this experience?’ And the truth is, for many families, they never really knew the important things of life before this threatened loss or actual loss came to them.

“Although they would not want the physical or emotional suffering of their child, they don't want to go back to being the same person.”

She adds: “The message out there is: go after one of everything you can acquire, and that's the way you'll make your family happy. Money and possessions. And all of these families learned that that was a lie”ⁱⁱⁱ

You'll make your family happy with money and possessions. “And *all* of these families learned that that was a lie.”

What do we really value? Our children and their well-being, our neighbors as ourselves, the health of the planet, the peace of the nations of the world?

Or one of everything we can acquire?

Whom are we serving?

As we listen, we find the good news in the Sermon on the Mount.

This is the good news: Jesus graciously invites us to wisely use what we have and to let go of whatever it is that holds us captive or impoverishes that we might know true freedom and true wealth—serving only one Master is how he puts it.

Mary Jo Bane, a professor at Harvard's Kennedy School teases out the meaning of this good news for us when she says: “Churches are among the few institutions I see that [can] provide forums for deliberations based on our values and our morals and our commitments—as a kind of counter to the market.”^{iv}

Churches—and I think she means congregations like this one—need to be leading the discussion about value and human worth.

Ours is a consumer culture, and young people are not oblivious to all the messages sent about buying and getting. The messages are everywhere. Are our values and the commitments of this

congregation as much a part of the fabric of the lives of children and youth as the values of the market?

We in the community of a church are always in danger of succumbing to the ethos of the world around us. But we are also able to announce to the world that there are still higher values. We can say that something else matters more than money and profit.

You're gonna have to serve *somebody*. Who will it be?

This, then, is the purpose of Lent—to see once again, the graciousness of God, to find the good news, to know that the One we serve is the living God.

And we do this, Jesus suggests, by being clear about what we value. “Storing up treasures in heaven,” is how he puts it.

Remember—and I say this a lot, so that we don't become so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly use—remember that when Jesus speaks of heaven, he is not talking some place where all good people will go when they die if they just do *this* or believe *that*. Jesus really isn't talking about some “place” at all, because Jesus is not as concerned about our *going* to heaven, as he is about the realm of heaven—God's realm—*coming* to earth. This is what he teaches his followers to pray for and, indeed, this is what we pray for each time we gather in this place.

When he talks about “treasure in heaven,” then, Jesus is pointing toward the great value of this earth and of our life *before* we die.

And when Jesus says “store up treasure in heaven,” he seems to think that we'll be able to do just that. He doesn't tell us *what* that treasure is. He doesn't tell us *how* to store up that treasure. He leaves that up to you and me with a sense that we'll be able to figure it out. Maybe so.

In the Greek of Matthew's gospel, Jesus speaks directly to everyone, using the second person plural: “*All of you*, don't store up treasures on earth, but *all of you*, store up treasures in heaven.”

And, of course, it's always good when Jesus speaks to the crowd, because, lost in that crowd, I might be able to avoid what he is saying and the claims he is making on *my own* life. I can leave that to others as I go about my business.

You know what I mean.

But suddenly and unexpectedly, Jesus changes to the second person singular: “*You*, Bill, where *your* treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

And I am left with no place to hide.

You are left with no place to hide.

You—not just me, each individual one of you listening—where *your* treasure is there *your* heart will be also.

You're gonna have to serve somebody.

But, well, you know this: you cannot serve God and *mammon*.

So you decide.

Decide from your heart.

ⁱ Amy Jill Levine, *Sermon on the Mount*, pg. 96.

ⁱⁱ M. Eugene Boring, "Matthew," *NIB*, pg. 210.

ⁱⁱⁱ *New York Times*, Sept. 17, 1995 quoted in "Voluntary Simplicity" issue of UCC Connections.

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Harvard Magazine, July-August 1999, pg. 99.