

First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, NC  
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Rev. Pendleton B. Peery

With Our Whole Heart: Getting Our Priorities Straight  
Exodus 20:1-5, Matthew 6:24-38

Last week began our summer sermon series on the Ten Commandments with Katherine preaching on Jesus' summation of the Law. When asked to capture what was most important in the number of ways that God teaches us how to live, Jesus answered that we are to love God with our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves.

This week we start getting more specific about what loving God and neighbor looks like as we consider the first of the Ten Commandments that we just heard Kirk read from Exodus:

*I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...*

The first clause in that verse from Exodus is the key to understanding everything that follows. The Law of God is prefaced by a reminder of what God has done to make us his people. Because of God's action, we are no longer slaves to powers of this world. But we are not our own. We belong to Lord – who brought us out of the land of Egypt – and later – who saved us by the blood of the cross. From this place, we are eager to hear what a life lived in gratitude to God and in God's will looks like.

So the commandments begin with the first:

*You shall have no other gods before me.*

The father of the Reformation, Martin Luther said that the whole of scripture is, in some sense, commentary on the first commandment.

Martin Luther also said that “to have a god is nothing more than to trust or believe in something with your whole heart.”

It begs the question – to what or to whom do we give our whole heart?

Throughout the summer, we will pair a New Testament scripture with the Commandment of the day to see how Jesus echoes God's Law in the life of discipleship.

This morning – based in no small part on my own awareness of the ways that I break this first commandment – we will be reading from Matthew's gospel as Jesus teaches his followers during his Sermon on the Mount.

Listen with me for the word of God...

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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.

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? 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?

And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?

And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

But 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?

Therefore do not worry, saying ‘what will we eat?’ or ‘what will we drink?’ or ‘what will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

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

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Be honest.

Don’t you wish Jesus would be a little more practical?

I mean, what are we supposed to do with this?

“Look at the birds of the air...

Consider the lilies of the field...

Do not worry about your life...what you will eat, or drink or wear...”

As others have noted before me<sup>1</sup>, what Jesus preaches here is all well and good, but last I checked the birds of the air and lilies of the field didn’t have a mortgage note. Or car insurance.

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<sup>1</sup> Long, Tom, *Matthew* (Westminster Bible Companion, 1998) p. 75.

Or children who will attend colleges that require tuition payments.  
Or 401K contributions to offset the soon-to-be-non-existent Social Security program that currently takes money out of my paycheck.

The last I checked, the birds of the air and the lilies of the field weren't the ones laying awake at night wondering how to scratch out a life on a fixed income, or earn back money that was lost during the Great Recession, or figure out a way they could afford to retire before they turned 75. The birds of the air and the lilies of the field don't sound like they have a clue what it would be like to be a single parent working two jobs who still cannot afford the cost of housing that is not affordable.

*Look at the birds of the air; the lilies of the field...*

No disrespect, Jesus, but it almost me a little defensive.

"Do not worry about your life..."

Well...thanks.

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Of the things Jesus taught when he walked on this earth, his most popular topic was money.

I haven't confirmed it, but I am relatively certain that in ten years of preaching sermons, the topic of money ranks pretty low on my "go-to" list...especially outside of September and October when we are in the midst of the stewardship season and I try to motivate you to give.

When I read about the church – not just ours, but the Church in general – I seldom see us making headlines about what it is we say about money.

And yet, Jesus spent more of his time talking about money than he did talking about anything else. I wonder why?

When it comes to us hearing Jesus talk about money – I think a natural reaction is to be defensive or to be dismissive. I've already given you a taste of what it looks like to be defensive this morning. It is just as easy to dismiss Jesus' talk about money as naiveté. How could Jesus know what it is like to live in a world of 7 billion people with multinational corporations and advanced financial tools?

Yet we know better. The reason it is so hard to hear Jesus talk about money – and the reason we so often do not talk about money – is that we are convicted. We know the place that money holds in heart – and it is...if not the most important...at least close.

Jesus isn't being naïve.

He is not advocating that we be irresponsible or reckless with our financial resources...or that we should spend all we have in order to enjoy today because you never know what will happen tomorrow.

Jesus is simply asking us what we trust.

More pointedly, Jesus is asking us – as we think about the future – whether we trust in the God who created us...and is faithful to us...and has promised us a future. Or, when it comes to the future, whether we will trust in our own devices and our own resources and our own money.

In the Greek, the language of the New Testament, the word for trust is the root of the word for faith.

In what do we place our faith?  
Is it God? Or is it money?

“You cannot serve to masters,” Jesus said.  
Which will it be?

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Earlier this week I shared a visit with a colleague named Kate who is the pastor of a church in our Presbytery called The Grove. The Grove is near the Hickory Grove neighborhood – at the intersection of WT Harris and North Sharon Amity. When I last lived in Charlotte, the neighborhood was solidly middle class. Today, Kate’s church is surrounded by housing projects. Half of those in the housing projects are Latino.

What happened to the neighborhood by Kate’s church is exact opposite of what has happened to the neighborhood surrounding our church. Indeed, as I looked about and listen to Kate describe her ministry, I had the sense that the people who used to come to our back doors ten years ago, were now coming to Kate’s church.

Kate’s ministry at The Grove is difficult. It is not just the neighborhood that has changed. The church has, too. Leading in the midst of change is always hard, but when that change includes racial and social and economic shifts...it can be a bumpy ride.

During our visit, Kate told me about the various people and groups that she had reached out to ask to help her. For a variety of reasons, she struck out. The General Assembly didn’t have money. The Presbytery didn’t have money. There were but a few, small grants that she could access. Two years into the job, Kate realized that the cavalry were not coming.

“And all of a sudden,” she said, “I realized that the only resource we had left was to trust in the gospel that we said we believed.”

The story of The Grove Presbyterian Church is still being written – Kate’s work is still difficult – but there is vibrant worship, and multiple tutoring programs, and dance and art classes where kids from the church learn next to kids who live in the projects. There is a community garden. And a soccer ministry for Latino boys. God is being glorified.

You cannot serve two masters.  
Which will it be?

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To have a god, Luther said, is nothing more than to trust or believe in something with your whole heart.

In his commentary on Jesus’ words from Matthew, Fredrick Dale Brunner claims that the demand that the gospel lays on the hearts of those who are disciples is that we would be “the real atheists” of our culture; to turn our backs on the myth that success and salvation are related to the accumulation of riches,<sup>2</sup> embracing instead the promised future of the One “in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through whom God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

The God who claims our loyalty is the one who journeyed toward the cross to be crucified, only to be raised, in order that we might have freedom from sin and death.

There are no other gods who can do these things.

The God who has rightful claim to our loyalty promises us shalom and salvation.  
The other gods who compete for our loyalty promise us an easy retirement.

The God who has rightful claim to our loyalty is in relationship with us marked by sacrifice and commitment.  
The other gods who compete for our loyalty see us a means to a profitable end.

The God who has rightful claim to our loyalty was in the beginning and will be in the end.  
The other gods who compete for our loyalty are like grass that withers and flowers that fade.

In Scottish tradition, at the baptism of a child, the pastor uses these words:

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<sup>2</sup> Brunner, Fredrick Dale, *Matthew: The Christ Book* (Eerdmans, 2004) p. 237.

*For you Jesus Christ came into the world:  
for you he lived and showed God's love;  
for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary  
and cried at the last, 'It is finished';  
for you he triumphed over death  
and rose in newness of life;  
for you he ascended to reign at God's right hand.  
All this he did for you..*

All this, God did for us.

To whom will we give our heart?