

No One Can Serve Two Masters

Matthew 6:24-34

February 27, 2011

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There was a hit song that came out in the 80s, "Don't Worry, Be Happy." Do you remember that one? Our reading from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount today sounds a little like that, when Jesus says, "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own" (34). "Don't worry, be happy."

Elizabeth Gilbert has another book out, a sequel to *Eat, Pray, Love*—Some of you remember I was pretty hard on that book (and movie) in another sermon. So I don't plan on getting her new book, *Committed*, unless I find myself needing to read myself to sleep at night...But I was interested to read a couple of reviews on *Committed*. In January, *The New York Times* called this new book "chatty" (http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/10/books/review/Sittenfeld-t.html?_r=1&ref=review). Apparently she "chats" about marrying Felipe, whom she met in *Eat, Pray, Love*, and she "chats" while traveling around the world for another 10 months, waiting for Felipe to get his visa. (Don't ask me where people get the money to travel for months on end, without ever having to hold down a job...) Now, don't get me wrong, there's nothing wrong with traveling, or "chatting," or certainly there's nothing wrong with falling in love. It's just that this is another book about doing whatever it takes to be happy.

"Don't worry, be happy."

But Jesus' message was *a little* deeper than this. The reason you don't have to worry about tomorrow is that you have already made some very clear and significant choices, like the choice between God and money. "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" (24).

Each part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is an ethical choice. We've looked at these choices this month: whether to point the finger or accept certain groups of people, like the LGBT community; whether to choose death or life for all races of people in our society; whether to hate or love our enemies; and today, whether to choose to orient our lives around materialism or God.

Either one or the other...Jesus makes the choice quite clear.

Americans have been used to certain expectations. Take the Pavick family, for instance, featured in the cover story called "Dreams Deferred." in the *Christian Science Monitor*. Melissa Pavick, a free-lance photographer, her husband Tony, a systems engineer, have one child and are expecting a second. They have a small 2-bedroom home on a busy road in a town in Rhode Island. They bought their house for \$242,000 in 2005. Their plan was to start their family and then move to a quieter street and a bigger house before the second child came along. But Melissa's photography business dried up. The couple is holding their breath, hoping that Tony's company contracts will be renewed. Their health premiums

keep rising. Melissa has started two more jobs, substitute teaching and waitressing. Of course, their house has depreciated in value. They are certainly not able to move to a bigger house. Their dreams are deferred.

Middle-class Americans have come to expect to own a home, have a car for each adult, afford college for the kids, be sure of employer-provided health insurance, retirement income equal to 50% of their earnings at age 65, and nice family vacations. But now in the recession, these expectations are not working out. Pursuing these expectations, pursuing this kind of happiness, isn't as easy as it used to be. The new reality has made many people prioritize their values. What is really most important?

Melissa Pavik is having to come to grips with her values. She concludes that safety comes first, so the family will make a safe back entry on their house, so the children will not go out onto the busy street. True, they'd rather move to a quieter neighborhood, but that just isn't an option. Melissa says, what's most important are the values she grew up with: family, hard work, and service to others (Cynthia Anderson, "American Dreams Deferred," Oct, 10, 2010).

The American dream—to get ahead financially—to have multiple cars, expensive vacations, restaurant meals out—this American expectation is the choice to find happiness in wealth and material goods.

Our present economic time is helping some families see that wealth and material goods don't bring happiness. Jesus told us this long ago.

Young people are sometimes our teachers when it comes to values. A project, called "If I Had a Trillion Dollars Youth Video Contest," sponsored by the American Friends Committee, shows teenagers choosing not a personal dream of wealth, but to put money toward efforts like global immunizations, eradicating malaria or cancer, funding national security, education, public health and HIV research. A trillion dollars have been spent on the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; what if that money were spent in other ways?

(<http://afsc.org/action/if-i-had-trillion-dollars-youth-video-contest>) Young people have posted their videos on YouTube after prioritizing national and international needs.

Elvis Wong, a senior at Casa Grande High School, in Petaluma, is making some decisions that reflect his values. Elvis' father was laid off as an engineer at Tellabs in Petaluma. After months of job searching, he got a position in Southern California, and the family moved south. But not Elvis. Elvis stayed in Petaluma, renting a room in a house, in order to maintain his commitment to be the captain of the academic decathlon team, the school newspaper editor, and a volunteer with his church. He researched the Roaring Twenties for the decathlon team and is able to discuss parallels with today's values, especially materialism. For Elvis, his choice is to work hard, do well in school, and help others (Press Democrat, Feb. 13, 2011, p. D8).

We have choices about how we live. As people live longer, we have more years of retirement—perhaps 20 or 30 years. How will you choose to spend your time and resources in retirement?

Volunteer work is a choice of many retirees, and of many students and working people, in order to bring meaning to their lives.

I've been reading a fun book, *Thrift Store Saints: Meeting Jesus 25 Cents at a Time*. I picked it up because I am impressed at how many thrift stores there are here in Sonoma County. The author, Jane Knuth, tells about her experiences volunteering at a St. Vincent de Paul thrift store in Kalamazoo, MI. Jane is the only volunteer at St. Vincent de Paul's under 80. She has school-age children, and volunteers one day a week while the kids are at school.

At the thrift store one day, in walks a woman who just got a job and has to wear blue pants to work, but not jeans. She only has jeans, so she needs some "nice blue pants." But she hasn't gotten her first paycheck yet, so she asks if she could pay for a pair of pants in 2 weeks. Jane says, "What size?" She finds her a pair, and the woman asks how much they cost, and Jane says, "Don't worry about it. What else do you need? A blouse?" "No they give us a shirt to wear on the job. And I can wash out it each night." Then the woman started to cry. Jane asked, "Do you need shoes and socks?" She nodded, and Jane helped her find a nice pair of loafers and a couple of pair of socks. Jane wished there were more good socks to choose from. They were all done in five minutes, and Jane thought about all the hours she spent shopping at the mall with her girls. Then the woman asked Jane if she would pray for her, and then Jane asked the woman if she would pray for *her*.

One of the teachings of St. Vincent de Paul goes like this: *"The poor are our masters; they are our kings; we must obey them. It is no exaggeration to call them this, since our Lord is in the poor"* (Jane Knuth, 53). Jesus is in the poor. Jesus is in the face of every person we meet in need.

To which master are you devoted: to God and the poor and the needs of the world, or to wealth and the things wealth can buy? Are you seeking God or pleasure? Are you serving God, or are you looking for the carefree life? "Don't worry, be happy."

Jesus describes a deeper happiness, one that aligns us with a higher, selfless principle and one that gives us a deeper joy.