



First United Church of Oak Park

You Cannot Serve Two Masters

Matthew 6:19-24

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Both the texts before us this morning set up a binary set of alternatives. On one side of this binary is a human expression of reality, with all the imperfections, self-interest, and failings that come along with being who we are. On the other side of the binary is the divine, the God who calls us to faith and new life in Jesus Christ. The question or challenge that is put before us in both these texts is “Whom do we trust?” Do we trust ourselves: our judgments, our achievements, our leaders? Or, do we put our trust in God?

We are people of faith. We’ve made the effort to come to church this morning, and most, if not all of us, take our faith seriously. I’m pretty sure that if I put the question, “Whom do you trust?” to a show of hands this morning, many of us might quickly say that we put our trust in God. We would affirm that God is, indeed, the center of who we are as individuals and as a church. I am confident that it is our genuine intention to live that way.

I am also confident that it is much easier to talk about trusting God than it is to do it in everyday life. By setting up these binary alternatives, our texts this morning remind us of the very real challenges we face when we try to be faithful.

In our snippet this morning from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus names, straight out, one of the elephants in the room in most North American churches: Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.

Jesus talks here of money: my retirement plan, your savings account, children’s weekly allowances, this church’s endowment. “Do not store up for yourselves earthly treasures.” Would it surprise you to know that this text is never included regularly in the lectionary, that is, it is never recommended for preaching? That deliberate omission may stem from the fact that this text goes against so much of what we are taught as children, and so much of what we depend on as adults who are trying to be responsible.

My parents got divorced when I was about 16 years old. As a result, my mother, who had been a homemaker, entered the workforce, because to meet expenses she needed income in addition to my dad’s child support. At 16, I was starting to think ahead toward college and a college major, and a life after I finished school. I can remember having a conversation – probably multiple conversations – with my mother, in which she said, “You have got to prepare yourself to get a job, and work, and take care of yourself. You cannot depend on anybody else to take care of you. Look at me,” she said. “I thought I was going to be taken care of, but that didn’t happen. You can’t take that chance.”

I have to say, my mother got through to me. I was pretty independent already, but whether it was by watching her, or talking with her, or breathing in the Calvinist work ethic of western Pennsylvania, I got the message. I have to take responsibility for myself, and I have to behave responsibly toward those entrusted to my care.

One of the ways I do that is by building up earthly treasures. My husband and I have bank accounts. We have retirement plans. We hope not to overburden each other or our kids as we get older. I think that’s what I’m

supposed to do. I think that is being faithful to be careful with my money and to plan for the future. So what am I to do with this text? What are we to do with it?

It is not appropriate to write this off and tell ourselves that Jesus is not really talking about money. He is talking about money; he talks about money a lot; if we promise not to beat each other up about these texts, we could do an interesting adult education series about this. Without minimizing the challenge of this text, let me say that I think Jesus' words are not only about the amounts we may have salted away. It is also about how we think about money, the value we assign to it. What matters most in our lives? Where do we find our deepest satisfaction, our truest joy?

Remember the book *Silas Marner*? If you've not read this as an adult, you should; it's way better than you remember. The book is about a curmudgeonly miser, Silas Marner, who hoarded the money he made from his business. A thief, however, broke into his home and stole his money. A short time later, a little girl, whose mother had collapsed and died nearby, wandered into his cottage. Silas saw something golden near his fire, and he thought it was his money, but it wasn't. It was the little girl's golden hair. She was an orphan, whom he eventually adopted, and learned to love. His life was completely transformed by becoming her father, and, in his family, he found meaning and happiness beyond his imagining. Years later, when his hoard of money was found, it mattered little to him because having money was no longer his purpose in life; love was his purpose, and it gave him joy.

Whom do we trust? On what do we really stake our lives? Is it in the money we save up? Or is it in the divine grace we discover in the deep gladness of faithful living and sharing with others?

Wrestling with the role that our wealth plays in our lives and in our faith is, I suspect, an ongoing struggle for those of us who are blessed with an abundance of resources. I know it's an ongoing struggle for me. Wealth gives the illusion of being super reliable, and it is so tempting. Whom do you trust?

Jesus is not the only person who asks that question in scripture. Old Testament leaders like Moses and Joshua and the prophets ask it repeatedly of their followers. So does the apostle Paul and, as is the case in our second text today, he addresses it to a congregation as a whole, not to individuals: whom do you trust as a congregation?

The congregation in Corinth was a lively and contentious group of folks. The city itself was cosmopolitan and cultured. The Mediterranean world was a competitive one, in which individuals and households strived to have their place in the sun. Public reputations and visible achievements were important to people. They would have liked things like having their last name plastered on the side of a building for the whole city to see it. Honor and recognition secured a good place for high-achieving individuals and, if those individuals had good social standing, that guaranteed that everybody in their households did, too. In Corinth - in the city and the church - people fought to get ahead, and they fought to make sure that everybody else knew they got ahead.

They fought about all kinds of things. They took each other to court. They bragged about whose spiritual gifts were better than somebody else's. Rich people elbowed their way to the best seats at communion and left poorer people to fend for themselves. And, they formed factions.

Some of this competitive, dog-eat-dog behavior was the culture in which they lived. This was how they had been taught to behave, and so they did. Some of it was probably selfish; it felt good and it advanced their self-interest. And some of it was human nature. I know of no culture in which people do not form subgroups:

tribes, clans, families, denominations, political parties, fraternities and sororities, teams, factions, and sub-factions. As humans, we are as wired to form ourselves into sub-groups as we are to store up earthly treasures, and we do so for similar reasons: to get ahead, to protect ourselves, to give ourselves and our families a sense of security.

Whom do you trust? Paul asks this of the quarreling congregation in Corinth, who have divided themselves into factions competing for power. Some follow one church leader; some follow another. As Paul looks at this contentious mess, he sets before them a binary choice. Do you put your trust in human leaders, who cannot seem to agree with each other, or do you put your trust in Christ Jesus our Lord?

Again, it is probably much easier for us to pay lip service to the answer that faith invites us to give to this question, than it is to really shift our allegiance. Paul recognizes how difficult this shift of allegiance is. It demands of us that we put aside so much of what we commonly rely on - worldly wisdom, common sense, political and social capital. To trust God demands of us, ultimately, that we give up our self-control.

Remember the first Star Wars movie, now renumbered to be the fourth? At the climax, Luke Skywalker is in his fighter, hurtling toward the center of the death star with Darth Vader on his tail, and he's trying to get his scope lined up so he can drop that proton torpedo in just the right place, and blow up the death star. But because everything is so bumpy, he can't steady the scope. And Vader's getting closer, and he still can't quite figure out when or where to drop the torpedo, and the first time you see it, you wonder if he's going to make it. And then Luke hears Obi Wan's voice, saying "Trust the force, Luke. Trust the force." So he turns off the controls and lets the force guide him.

Whom do you trust? Both Paul and Jesus challenge us to turn off our controls, which we tend to over-trust, and in which we tend to over-invest. They challenge us instead to trust the grace of God in Christ Jesus. That challenge puts each and every one of us, and each of our congregations, on a life-long learning curve. We do not learn to trust grace overnight. There is no single, life-shattering event that reorients us to this good news. With God's help, and the support and patience of one another, we grow into it.

In our days of transition as a congregation, one of our temptations is going to be to fall back into the controlling ends of the binaries that Jesus and Paul put before us, because those are the sorts of things that have worked for us before. But Jesus and Paul invite us to let go of what we know. They invite us instead to trust in the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and to do so with love and forgiveness and patience. We are already working on that, I know, and some days we do pretty well. May God be with us as we continue our journey of trust and faith. Amen.