

“IT’S ALL ABOUT CHOOSING”

Isaiah 49:8-16a; Matthew 6:24-34

February 27, 2011

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Back in the days of the early church, the city of Ephesus, on the coast of what is now Turkey, was a great seaport city of 100,000. If you go and visit there now, you can still see what was the road to the sea, lined on both sides with the ruins of what used to be temples to the many gods of many cultures: Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Cretan: you name it. The Roman Empire took its multiculturalism seriously, and sailors, before they went off to face the perils of the sea, would stop often by the temples of many to make an offering, to hedge their bets, to seek protection from wherever they could find it.

There was no Christian temple down the avenue of gods. The Christians worshipped in secret, coded signs to their meeting place that still remain today carved into the stone walkway. But to get to the building where the Christians met, all believers still had to pass up through that long avenue bounded on both sides with shrines to other deities. Were they tempted to maybe stop at one or two? Certainly the culture of their day would have encouraged it. How did they deal with that temptation? How did they close their eyes and ears to the inducements and promises of the false gods that surrounded them?

In significant ways, our lives are not so different. As we walk down the avenues of our lives, there are false gods all around us calling us to come worship at their temples. The temple of power, the temple of success, the temple of money, the temple of consumerism. We are invited, tempted, to think that we will feel better about ourselves, feel safer, more secure, happier, if we just what. . .? For each of us, the things that constitute serious temptation are different. But for each of us sitting here I am pretty sure, there is at least one god who is not God whose calls to us are particularly alluring.

Too often, people take this morning’s Gospel reading—Jesus’ teaching about worry and the lilies of the field—in isolation, not noticing that Jesus’ teaching there begins with the word, “Therefore,” which should serve notice that we have to read the words that follow in the context of what comes before. And what comes before here are Jesus’ words about the essential spiritual disciplines of Christian life: prayer, fasting, almsgiving, all of which culminates in Jesus asking us to think about what we consider to be our treasure.

“Where is your treasure?” Jesus asked, or as I would ask it, what do you treasure? It’s a really important question. If I asked you right now to make a list of the top five things in life that are most important to you, that you value, five essentials for the best possible quality of life: what would be on that list? That’s your list A in this morning’s sermonic exercise. Now comes list B. As you live your life day to day: as you make choices about how you spend your time, how you spend your money, what you eat, what you wear, what you do for leisure and work and acts of devotion: if someone looked at your date book and your checkbook and your daily habits, and tried to figure out from that what your treasure is: how would your list A and your list B line up?

Jesus says, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” He doesn’t say, “Where your heart is, there will your treasure be,” but the opposite of that. In other words, as much as we may not like it, List B, not list A, tells the true story about where our treasure actually lies and where our hearts are. How close are list A and list B for you? For most of us, there is a gap there, sometimes a significant gap. It’s not that we mean to be thoughtless, that we mean to ignore what we claim as our highest priorities, but in the noise and confusion and the busyness and the temptation of day to day, it’s terrifyingly easy for lists A and B to grow further and further apart. That’s why Jesus says so starkly, “No one can serve two masters.” We can serve God, or we can serve what is not God, all that calls our name and moves our lives from List A to List B. And it’s in the context of all this that we are to understand Jesus’ teaching about not being anxious about what we eat or what we drink or what we wear or what might happen tomorrow.

Jesus is not saying we should live our lives as happy-go-lucky, unthoughtful, uncaring people—that we should not be concerned about doing our jobs, or saving prudently for the future. He’s saying that we live our lives every day foremost as God’s holy people in God’s holy world where even the birds of the air and the lilies of the field are precious: precious to God, and, Jesus would hope, also precious to us. And I would guess that for pretty much all of us sitting here, when we make list A about our treasure, that list may not be perfectly aligned, but it comes way closer than list B to our understanding of ourselves and our lives and God’s world as holy, as to be enjoyed and cherished but not exploited. But then those other gods call out our names, and we start caring about, worrying about, prioritizing those things that are not our true priorities.

“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? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? Strive first for the kingdom of the God, and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given you.” The closest, the hardest discipline of Christian life is to make List B conform to list A, and have list A conform to the understanding that we belong to God, and that therefore all of life and all the world is holy ground. We are sister and brother not only to our families and to our church family, but also to the foxes and the rabbits, to the homeless who live under the bridge, the refugees, the victimized, the unwashed, and the unwanted. They are part of us, and we them, and all of us part of God’s beloved creation.

It’s not that we don’t know this already. If we didn’t know it on some level, then we would not be here this Sunday or any Sunday. But living it, living both in that joy and sorrow, in that certainty and uncertainty, living open joyful lives that make those connections clear and strong: to do that well, well that’s a whole life’s work. And we become the whole and holy people God intends for us to be: we do it one decision, one choice at a time. Big choices, small choices, every decision that moves List B closer to List A, and both to those to God’s loving will for us: that’s the path of becoming. I think it’s easy sometimes to become overwhelmed by the enormity of who God wants us to be, and how we can meet that impossibly high standard. And Jesus’ answer to us is this, “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries enough of its own.” You just have to think about today. What can you do today to close your eyes and ears to the marketplace of false gods that would lure you from list A to list B? What can you do today that matters: from recycling the church bulletin, to supporting local farmers, to letting our families know that they are loved and letting politicians know we stand for the poor and

medically indigent? We can write a check, volunteer at Stone soup, we can greet our neighbor, we can say our prayers and remember to look around and notice the world around us. We can ask ourselves what more we can do for God, God's people, and God's planet today, and get up and do it again tomorrow, and again the day after that. Big decisions. Little decisions. All the choices we make every day. And List B can become list A, and List A a more perfect following of the one true God who gets up every morning and chooses to love us and call us God's own. Thanks be to God. Amen.