

## Sermon for March 2, 2008

Reading: Matthew 6:24-34

Rev. Curt Anderson

“Give us this day our daily bread”

The section of the Lord’s Prayer we are thinking about today is: “Give us this day our daily bread.”

When we were planning this sermon series, we determined that the reading from Matthew – about God and wealth, the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, seeking first God’s kingdom and not worrying about other things – we decided that reading best exemplified and expanded the short petition from the Lord’s Prayer.

And we came up with the general idea for the banner, representing that Matthew reading, which Linda Hancock executed so beautifully.

There is such a simplicity and calmness to all these things. *Give us this day our daily bread.* How simple that is – how uncomplicated and unpretentious. *You can’t serve God and wealth; but don’t worry – serve God first and you will receive everything else you need.*

What could be simpler or more direct than that?

And of course the simplicity and the serenity of the banner reflect the underlying tone of both readings.

The problem is: I don’t feel peaceful and serene as I think about explaining and applying this in a sermon, or even (and maybe especially) applying it in my own life.

But when you’re not sure what to do, one good place to start is at the beginning. So,... *No one can serve two masters.... You cannot serve God and wealth (or mammon, as the older translations put it).*

Now this is direct and fairly clear, even if not very specific; and it’s actually very good to keep in mind. While we have many tasks, many goals, many directions in our lives, it is incredibly tiring and inefficient if some of them move in opposite directions from other ones.

I remember when our children were in Middle School and High School. Family unity and empathy and caring were really important to us; and having dinner together, to talk about the day, was 1 way we tried to emphasize that. But,... what with young people’s schedules then (and now), there were always conflicts. You know the phrase – we felt pulled in 2, or 3 or 4, directions at the same time. And sometimes our own schedules complicated matters even further.

So the first part of the passage is pretty clear, but the example I used should give us a clue to the upcoming difficulty. And we encounter that difficulty as the passage progresses: *Do not worry about your life,... Is not life more than possessions (or wealth)? Look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap ... yet your heavenly Creator feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Consider the lilies of the field ... Therefore, do not worry ...*

*Strive first for the Realm of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

Here we begin to encounter real difficulty. *Don’t worry about your life, your possessions or wealth.* By that, does Jesus mean: Don’t plan ahead? Don’t plan for retirement because God will take care of that? Don’t save for home repairs or a down payment on a house because God will provide a place for you to live? Don’t cook dinner because God will have it ready for us?

I’m being a little foolish with some of those questions, but I’m trying to make a point. And as long as we are questioning Jesus on this, I’d like to share with you some of the other concerns raised by

all of us in Bible Conversations on Tuesday. What would you say about this passage to a person with AIDS in southern Africa; or to a dweller in sub-Saharan Africa living in permanent drought:— a person watching his crops shrivel up and his animals die; or to peasants in South America who've lost their land and thus their livelihood to multi-national corporations?

What would you say to people who have a good income, who saved diligently for retirement, who now have more than enough, so they don't worry about money and possessions? Are they following Jesus' words from this passage? If they are, we've just made Jesus into a financial planner.

We've gotten pretty tangled up here. And I'm going to tell you right now that I don't have clear, rational answers for these questions on a one-to-one basis, like: here's the question, and here's its easy-to-understand-and-follow answer. It's not like that.

I do want to make a few comments about some of these concerns I've raised. But in doing so, I want to be sure I'm not playing the part of the lawyer, in that story from the gospel of Luke. You remember?

When Jesus tells him to: *Love the Lord your God with all your being, and love you neighbor as yourself*. The lawyer responds with his question: *Who is my neighbor?*

The lawyer wants to know who his neighbor is, that he has to love, so he can also know all the people who aren't his neighbor – whom he doesn't have to love. He wants to limit his liability. He wants to avert the full force of Jesus' words.

I don't want to do that with this passage. In my comments, I'm going to try as hard as I can not to **weasel my way out** of the clear meaning of Jesus' words.

First, I'd like to respond to the suffering third world people questions and objections to this passage.

You know: what would you say about this passage to Latin American Peasants who have lost their land and livelihood to multi-national corporations, and who are not certain about where their next day's food is coming from.

Interestingly, everyone who has been to Latin America or elsewhere in the 3<sup>rd</sup> world on a church mission or outreach-purpose trip would tell you that this doesn't seem to be a concern to Christians in those parts of the world. They don't seem to feel unprovided-for by God.

In fact, they seem to feel so rich that they share their meager possessions generously with North American Christians who come to visit. I would really encourage you to talk about this with any of our members who have been to Chiapas: the Arnolds, Sue Jones and Mary Myers, Jeanne Marshall, Ron and Diana Shaw, Carol Bracewell.

They and everybody else I know tell the same story – people whom we would think might feel slighted by God actually feel quite blessed. It's really amazing.

And it is the reason, I think, we can't use the plight of these third world Christians to call this passage into question. If they don't feel cheated and let-down by God for trusting in Christ, we have no right to deny Christ's words by using those Christians as an example.

Second, I like to remind us that the whole Sermon on the Mount was spoken directly for Jesus' disciples, which means, the church. The crowds listened in, of course; and at the end they marveled at the authority with which Jesus taught. But the direct application of the words was for the disciples; and today that is the church.

**We** are called to follow Jesus' words here. And not just you and you and you and me,... but **we**. We are together in this.

And just as Paul tells the church in Galatia: *Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ*, our joint bearing the burdens of a Christian life makes the struggles of that life easier to abide and accept, and the blessings even more joyful.

If we are supporting and encouraging each other in following this teaching, and other difficult teachings of Jesus, and sharing the struggles and the blessings of that life, it is much easier and more possible to live as Jesus intended.

I am afraid, as a modern, highly educated, rational group of Christians, we are much more individualistic in our Christianity than Jesus ever intended or imagined. We assume we can follow Jesus alone, by ourselves, without bearing one another's burdens, as Paul says. That makes the full Christian life difficult or impossible, and makes it more of a struggle and a pain than a **joy**.

So now, with those caveats, we turn to the passage. How do we start putting everything aside, including our concerns about wealth and possessions, in order to follow Christ?

I didn't realize it, at the time the staff made this decision, but coupling this passage with the prayer Jesus taught his disciples actually gives us the foundation for our search. To **begin** putting our concerns and worries aside to follow Jesus, including our concerns about wealth and possessions, we need to begin in prayer.

I told you earlier that our understanding and living this passage does not begin in our rationality. Where it does begin is in our spiritual lives: it begins in prayer.

If we were students in a discipline, learning from a Master Teacher, we would give ourselves to that master teacher in our learning.

Christians through the ages have understood that giving themselves to God begins in prayer. The slow, gradual process of turning our lives over to Jesus – serving God as the master of our lives, rather than wealth or possessions or mammon or any other concern, begins as we pray for strength, forgiveness, courage, insight, love, and grace.

The Prayer for Daily Use or the booklet of prayers that the Deacons prepared may be useful tools. Also, there are many books published with the explicit purpose of serving as aids for prayer and spirituality. Using one of them regularly could be very helpful.

My second suggestion is to worship regularly; and that let's me say a word about Communion, which may be represented on the banner by the wheat growing in the field.

To secular eyes, Communion looks like a pretty little thing, a piece of bread dipped in grape juice – as prayer seems like trying to talk to someone whom you can't see or hear.

But as Christians, we believe that God is particularly present in prayer and Communion. Prayer can be the beginning of giving ourselves to God; and Communion can be the presence of Christ in our midst: for nurturance, empowerment, and support.

Last week, the person who responded to my sermon gently chided me for having a good analysis of an issue but very little in the way of suggested solutions. I'm afraid it's going to be the same today. I can't tell you specifically where you will be or **should be** led by our corporate worship and by your times of personal prayer. All I can do is promise you these two things: if you attend worship regularly and participate in Communion, God will become more real to you.

If you pray regularly for God to take away your concerns about money and wealth and lead you to follow Jesus more clearly and closely each day – God will answer your prayer. God will offer you Christ's path, and God will lead you in that direction.

C.S. Lewis said: *God is easy to please and hard to satisfy*. Most of us – and I'm very much including myself in this – have a long way to go in our personal discipleship. If we offer ourselves to God in worship and prayer, God will lead us 1 small step at a time toward the abundant and eternal life God has in store for us.

For that offer and promise, we give praise and thanks to God. Amen.