

Idols and Anxiety

Preached on Trinity 15
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
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Matthew 6:24-34

In 1980, a man named Kevin Hillier of Australia lived in a trailer park. He had just gotten a new metal detector and wanted to try it out. Well, as Mr. Hillier swept the ground looking for signs of hidden metal, he found something he never expected to find in his backyard. In fact, the readings on his metal detector were so unusual that he almost didn't pick up his shovel to investigate. But he did. He dug down a mere foot underground and pulled out a 61 pound nugget of pure gold! Sometime after he and his family discovered the golden rock, they sold it to a casino in Las Vegas, NV called (appropriately) the “Golden Nugget” for a little over a million dollars

And the nugget purchased by the Golden Nugget Casino was given a unique name. If you look at this nugget just right, you can see it looks a little like a hand with the index and middle finger raised, while the ring and little fingers are tucked down into the palm. And so this famous rock was named (by someone) the “Hand of Faith.”

At first glance, we are struck by the irony of the name. You don't often think about gold and faith in the same sentence. And yet, on further examination, that seems to be a perfect name for this particular hunk of gold. For the owners of the Golden Nugget—and their patrons—gold represents their faith. It is the ultimate object of their trust and allegiance, and that is just what faith means. Gold is where their final allegiance lies. It is that by which they measure their worth, and it is in gold's hand that they find their well-being. Thus, the nugget known as the “Hand of Faith” is well-named. It is literally their GOD.

In Matthew 6:24, Jesus says “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” Yet we are all, at one time or another, hedging our bets. We want to serve God, but trusting Him is difficult. In an insecure world, we crave security. There is so much we cannot know about the future, so much can go wrong. What if God isn't paying attention, or just doesn't understand the gravity of the situation? We need to make sure we have enough of the things we need and that our future won't be one of destitution. We don't really worship money or gold, we just want the security they provide. We are anxious about not having enough. God might provide eternal security, but we need earthly security because the lack of it presses down upon us. Money and other assets won't let you down when so much else does. They represent our significance, our security, our future, our well-being. They can be our worldly god and God the Father can be our heavenly God. What an elegant division of labor!

But do you remember the first commandment God gave to the people He had claimed as His own? “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God...” (Exodus 20:3-5)

God spoke this and His other commandments to the people and then had Moses go up on Mt. Sinai to receive the Law. Moses is gone for about 40 days. That's over a month! And eventually the people begin to get a little uncomfortable with the situation. They go to Aaron and say "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." (Exodus 32:1b) Aaron listens to them, and we know what kind of god he fashioned—a golden calf.

Now the question is, why would they do something so dumb? The gold wasn't going to clothe or feed them. They couldn't spend it. And the calf hadn't (and couldn't) lead them out of Egypt, or any place else. So why would they turn to worship this idol made of gold, when the real God had just destroyed Egypt's might with 10 plagues, and then destroyed the armies of Egypt at the Red Sea? Why worship something so useless?

Well, they did it because they felt insecure and anxious. Moses was gone. And God was nowhere to be seen. In fact, they'd never seen God. But they could see this golden calf. And they felt secure by being able to see and touch something "real". And that was the trap.

Years ago, I visited a family where the husband and wife were having marital troubles. The wife showed me a box her husband kept in the closet. The box was full of lottery tickets that he had bought. The lottery tickets were worthless. He hadn't won anything with them. But they represented the potential for the wealth he wanted, so he kept them in that box in the closet so he could look at them and occasionally touch them. There was no value there. But these tickets (and their potential for wealth) were real to him. He couldn't see God (he wasn't a Christian), but he could touch those lottery tickets.

When people do that with worthless things like used lottery tickets, or old magazines/newspapers, plastic bags, cardboard boxes, pieces of string, etc. – what do we call them? That's right, we call them hoarders. And we all know that it's not healthy to collect stuff that serves no real purpose and no one really wants. But since we see money as so important, we tend to give a pass to people who hoard it.

Now God never condemns people who have money or possessions. God *does* condemn those who hoard these valuable items. So, how would you know if you are hoarding stuff, as opposed to just taking care of valuable things, or simply having some money in the bank? When do you know when you've crossed the line into making these things your gods?

Someone has described it this way: The problem for God is not when people have money. The problem is when their money has them. It's when their possessions possess them. Jesus said: "You cannot serve both God and Money." But then he adds an intriguing word: "THEREFORE". You cannot serve both God and Money. **THEREFORE** I tell you, don't be anxious..."

Don't be anxious? You might as well say "Don't be human." Life is full of things to worry about. We're worried about our children, our grandchildren, our future, our health, our retirement, our house, our car, our country, our marriage, and our finances. There is no end of things to worry about. We take it as our responsibility to try to

lessen the amount of worrisome things, but no sooner is one worry eliminated when another pops up. It really is like Wack-a-Mole.

But we still must manage all the things there are to worry about. And money seems to offer the solutions we seek. It promises security and happiness and freedom from want. It promises us a sense of well-being, that everything will be OK.

But can it make good on that promise? Can money give you love, can it make other people love you, can it take away the fear of death, can it give your life meaning? Will money really eliminate worry and fear from a creature who knows his or her time on earth is short? Will money change the fact that everything you enjoy and everyone you love will one day be no more?

How can money eliminate the fear of a creature who realizes he or she is so vulnerable? Fear and anxiety are practically identical twins. Do you remember why Israel asked Aaron to make them calf of gold? Because they were worried, they were anxious. Moses had gone, and God wasn't talking to them. So they became afraid. And their fear led to desire to be able to see/touch something real. It didn't matter whether it had any real value. It was only important they be able to touch it...and reassure themselves. But idols don't bring true peace. We bow to them to escape anxiety and fear, but they only enable those dispositions to become stronger. They come to own us, and ultimately to destroy us. That's why God puts so much emphasis on us not being afraid.

Someone once counted the number of times God tells us not to be afraid in the Bible. 365 times—once for every day of the year. Now, why would God repeat that so often? Why say it over and over and over again? Why tell us not to be afraid? Because we so often are. And so God has to remind us time and time again not to succumb to fear. Likewise, Jesus tells us in the gospel today to “be not anxious.” The word “anxious” appears 6 times in this relatively short passage. Why would Jesus repeat that over and over again? Because fear and anxiety so dominate our lives. And it's critical that we pray for help combatting this. We need to pray that we come to a faith in God and His care for us that pushes fear aside.

Three times in Scripture, God tells Joshua (one of the greatest leaders the Israelites ever had) “Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged...” (Joshua 1:9) Why would God need to say that to Joshua? Because Joshua was terrified and discouraged. He was facing a test unlike any he'd ever encountered, and he wasn't sure if he could handle it. But not only does God tell him not to be terrified or discouraged... He tells him why: “for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.” Why shouldn't Joshua be terrified? Because God would be with him... everywhere.

When the army of Sennacherib surrounded Jerusalem, King Hezekiah tells his people: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged because of the king of Assyria and the vast army with him, for there is a greater power with us than with him." (II Chronicles 32:7) Hezekiah had no idea how God would rescue them from the King of Assyria, but he was confident God would. And the Lord did, for there was a greater power with Israel than there was with Sennacherib. Do not be afraid for God is with you. In John 16:33, Jesus said it a slightly different way: “I have

told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

In this world you and I will encounter situations we can't handle. One of the biggest lies of the glib, superficial, Christianity-lite that dominates our culture is the line that goes “God won't give you more than you can handle.” Really? If we truly try to live the way God wants us to and undertake the frightening tasks that He often presents us with, we will soon learn that we are facing more than we can handle. Life is difficult. People are difficult. We can be easily overcome. Jesus didn't come into the world merely to cheer us on because we were already doing such a great job. He came because we were and are in desperate straits. We cannot save ourselves; nor can we “fix” the human condition. But we can have peace because Jesus has overcome the world.

Now, getting back to worry or anxiety. If we don't have a living faith in God, we will very naturally seek our security in money and possessions or maybe our ability to control things. Control can be a potent idol as well. But like all idols, it cannot finally deliver. Who of us can really “tame” reality? Surely we can improve the lives of many people, and we should always endeavor to do that through our various callings. But who of us can control things and people enough to banish all worry? Our control of things and people often depends on force, fear, or manipulation, and so is provisional at best. Without trusting in an all-good and all-powerful God, we will inevitably put our trust in some creature, whether ourselves or something or someone else. And we all know deep down that such trust is ultimately misplaced. There is nothing in this sinful and corruptible world that can really save us. And that is what Jesus is saying in our gospel today.

Worry and anxiety are diseases that rob us of faith. And these diseases will never be healed by the amount of money in your bank account or how much you believe you can control. Giving your life to God includes casting your burdens on Him, because they are more than you can handle. We need more than we ourselves can provide if we are going to truly prosper. It takes a great God to handle the predicament we are in. A big part of that predicament is that we seem to be the only creatures on this planet who want more than this world can offer. We want unconditional love that is not in great supply. We want security in a world that cannot finally provide it. We have our hearts broken and realize that we don't possess the resources to heal ourselves. This is a terrible realization and it appears that only humans have it.

Hence, we seek to divert ourselves with money, possessions, achievements, even relationships. We try to escape our anxiety by grabbing onto things that we can touch. “If I get this or have that, I will finally be happy and secure.” Or, “Life would be so much better if only _____ (you fill in the blank).

But at the end of our passage for today, Jesus offers us what appears to be overly simplistic and seemingly naïve advice to “...seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” (Matthew 6:33) Is He being impractical? Or is He telling us something we desperately need to hear?

One thing we know for sure is that anxiety is a terrible master. It ends up killing everyone in its grip. We try to overcome it and deal with our insecurity through

money or things or control or just about anything that we see as solid and real. But these don't really rid us of anxiety or our deep sense that our predicament is way more than we can deal with. If we are honest, we know that the world in the end offers us no lasting hope or peace or encouragement. But by contrast, our God wants to give us just these things. He loves us so much that He gave us the most valuable gift He had. He loved us so much that He gave us His only begotten Son, Who can heal all our infirmities.

It is through Jesus that we know that we don't have to be afraid or discouraged. It is through Jesus that we know that the wealth and possessions this world offers are but false gods. It is through Jesus that we know that God will never leave us or forsake us. And it is through Jesus that we know that God is more than enough God for us.

In the Name....