

The Problem with Two Masters  
Matthew 6:24  
October 14, 2018  
First United Methodist Church  
Baraboo, WI  
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Maybe you've seen the license plates: a house divided. It shows the logos of two different sports teams. Michigan State and U. of Michigan Fans. A house divided is when Green Bay Packers and Chicago Bears fans living under the same roof; or Cubs and White Sox fans. In a 1858 speech, when Abraham Lincoln talked about a house divided, he was talking about a nation torn apart by slavery. Lincoln was quoting Jesus. In Mark 3:24-25 we read "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand." In response to his extraordinary actions beyond human understanding, some accused Jesus of being demon possessed. His answer was in effect how can one who is doing so much good – healing people – have evil in him? That would be a house divided. Today Jesus talks to us about a heart divided. "You cannot serve God and wealth." If you try, there will be constant inner conflict, until one or the other side wins out. Which will to be, Jesus asks us? Who will be your master?

Last week we talked about the treasures of our heart. We heard Jesus warn us to be careful what we spend our time, money and energy on, Where our treasure is, there will your heart be also. If you buy a truck, car, boat or house, you need to keep on spending time and money on making it look good and stay in good working order. Is that what you want to do? Is that were you want to keep investing your time, money and energy? Maybe so. But think it through before you invest. Where is your treasure? To find out just look at your checkbook and your calendar; these show where we spend the most money and time. Is this is actually what you really value?

Is your calendar so jam packed that it feels overwhelming? Have we said "yes" to too many things? Look at your checkbook, your savings account register, credit card bill or pile of unpaid bills. Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Have you swiped too many credit cards? Is your financial treasure in line with your heart, what you value most? Or are you working hard to pay off stuff that doesn't make you truly happy? In this worship series on treasure matters Jesus invites us to focus on what's in our hearts. Who are you serving? Who will we serve?

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. This is from the Sermon on the Mount. For the people Jesus was preaching to, masters and slaves were a lived reality. Jesus preached mostly to the Am' ha-aretz – the people of the land. These were nominal Jews who were too uneducated, poor,

too ignorant to follow all the Jewish laws. These were also vulnerable to economic exploitation by others. Jesus' words were meant for the poor and also speak to those who were rich. Poor people worry about money; and rich people worry about money. And rich and poor alike need to decide whom they will serve.

We began worship today singing the Family prayer song "as for me and my house we will serve the Lord." This is from Joshua 24:15 where God's people are invited by Joshua to publically say who they will serve. The people that God has chosen to be the instrument of salvation for the world – the people whose story began with Abraham and Sarah – are now on the move. They are taking possession of the land God promised and in this covenant making ceremony there is an altar created and the people make their promise: will we serve and obey the Lord our God ."

The story continues in the reading from 1 Samuel the people of Israel had to decide who they would serve: the Lord or the Asartes and Baals. These were the names of the Canaanite gods/goddesses, worshipped by the people who surrounded the people of Israel in the land where they now lived. It seemed so easy and so right to the Israelites at the time, that they would show allegiance to these gods (small g) as a way to make peace and get along with their new neighbors in this land. But the God we worship really does demand our highest loyalty. As the second commandment states "you shall have no other gods before me."

Many years later a songwriter named Bob Dylan who came to know God in Christ at a certain point in his life will pick up the story once more.

in 1979, during in his gospel period, the songwriter Bob Dylan wrote "Gotta Serve Somebody."

You may be an ambassador to England or France  
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance  
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world  
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed  
You're gonna have to serve somebody  
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

Later in worship we're going to pray the covenant prayer in the Wesleyan tradition (a contemporary version). This will be our attempt to say that for today, for this hour at least, God we want to serve you, be loyal to you. Even as we pray we know that when we leave this place we know we're going to be torn in lots of different directions. There will be less important things that compete for our attention, our time, our money, our energy. If we're not careful these can become our gods (small g). Like the people Samuel was speaking to, we are likely to make other things more important – we are tempted to serve another master.

You cannot serve God and wealth. It's ironic: on a dollar bill you'll find the words "In God We Trust" but you can't have it both ways: you can't trust in both God and wealth. Wealth (or "mammon" in Greek) is more than just money. Wealth represents a self-sufficient life, relying on our own powers and what we create/produce/gain to provide our wellbeing. To serve wealth is to invest our time, money and energy in things that we mistakenly think will give us security and control. In time, when we invest in these things, we become their slaves. It is so much easier to see how others have enslaved themselves than to recognize it in ourselves. The world is watching with shock and dismay as the extent of the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church is becoming clear. It's hard not to be horrified at what those in power did over the years to protect the institution of the church and placed that above the needs of the vulnerable, the children, the victims of clerical abuse. It appears that those in authority had no longer chosen to serve God but were serving wealth – in that they were loyal to the church which apparently had become the source of their well being, security and control. What happened to those in authority in the Catholic church can happen to any of us: we can substitute lesser gods (small g) for God with results that ripple out to harm others.

The good news is we learn to recognize when we're substituting gods (small g) for God (capital G). This worship series "Treasure" is based on a book by Jacob Armstrong. Here's a story about a time when Jacob realized he was worshiping gods (small g).

"Not long ago I bought a new car – not brand new but new to me and I really liked it. I was happy to get it. It was clean when I got it. Really clean. In fact, one of the first things I did was buy new mats to go on the floorboards. It looked even cleaner. Just the other day, my family and I got into the car. My wife, Rachel, was up front with me and our three girls were in back. We were headed to the park on a beautiful summer day. We stopped at a drive-through, and the girls ordered their favorite: grape Slushies. Before we pulled out of the parking lot, three-year-old Phoebe set her grape Slushy in an imaginary cup holder and let go of it. I heard the Slushy hit the floor and my heart broke. Purple sticky goodness cover the back of the car. Immediately I became furious. I asked Phoebe "why did you do that?" She responded "I don't know." We were supposed to be heading to the park on a beautiful summer day, and instead I was in a fast-food parking lot scrubbing and cleaning and muttering. None of my girls said a word but I sensed them wondering "when did this car become so important?" The answer: when I made it important.

Jacob Armstrong says that our hearts naturally, instinctively want to worship God and God alone, for somewhere deep inside we know that is the only way we can have true peace in life. How can we prevent ourselves from substituting worship of God (capital G) with worship of things that don't give us peace? How can we tell when we

have stopped having one master, but now have two or more masters? Here's what he suggests: Notice when you get angry. Notice when you get frustrated. That might be the key to recognizing your gods (small g) that you are putting at the center of your life, instead of God (capital G). That might mean you are trying to satisfy or please too many bosses, too many masters; that you have lost your focus on the one master who matters.

Which brings us to what all this has to do with us. Making wealth (or anything other than God) our master prevents us from seeing the truth that I shared with the children today. We are God's treasure. We are a people set apart as the Body of Christ to live differently from the rest of the world. We show in our lives the beautiful story of Jesus – his living, loving, healing, teaching, dying and rising again. The scripture today is just one of many places Jesus talks about money. Jesus talked more about money than he did heaven and hell combined. About one fourth of the parables Jesus told are about money. Jesus talked about money more than anything except the kingdom of god. Jesus talks about money in the Bible not because he wants you to give it to the church. I think the reason he spent some much time talking about money was, he saw that money (things, possessions, wealth) tend to close our hearts to God. He doesn't care about your money but he does cares about you. He treasures you. He cares about our hearts. The God story says that God chose to come to us in a person, in Jesus Christ. God chose to come to us in this way so that God would speak to us in a way we'd understand, as a person. And so that God could speak to our hearts. There is a God-shaped hole in each of us, that can only be filled when we choose to put God first. Only then can we have peace. We're never going to do a perfect job of always putting God first. What matters is that we are on the journey together, and as we make progress together, we will find ourselves in the place we want to be.

“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. Today, Jesus frees us to choose: who are you going to serve?”

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.