

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, Ohio, Epiphany 8, February 27, 2011, dedicated to the Stephen Ministers and Care Receivers and to David Holt, Moderator, and the 2011 Church Council leadership team, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Worry Lines”**

***I Corinthians 4:1-5; Matthew 6:24-34***

***The Friendship Window  
(Part Seven of Eight in the sermon series  
“Windows into the Soul”)***

Today, we continue our series “Windows into the Soul.” Today’s window was gift from Orlando Miller and family. It is often referred to as “The Friendship Window.” Building on the famous quote from Washington Gladden, “Religion is really about Friendship. Friendship between humanity and God and friendship with one another.” Rick Sayre has, once again, brought us a beautiful rendition of the Friendship Window. As the texts focus on anxiety and worry and Jesus’ response, I am mindful that friendship, kindness and love will carry us a long way on this journey.

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of your hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Have you ever held eye contact with a northern cardinal or two? A few weeks back, a pair of cardinals landed on our maple

tree out back. It was an early morning in which the north wind was winning the battle between of seasonal swings. I was praying (for something) when it happened. The male cardinal, all decked in red splendor, had landed on a low hanging branch, shaking in the wind as looked through the window into my eyes. Then his beloved, brown and beautiful as always, spotted me as well. Not prone to screeching, but unafraid to chirp, the two began talking as their focus stayed on me. Were they trying to tell me that the squirrels had gobbled up the sunflower seeds in the wild bird mix on the picnic table? Were they telling me that plummeting temperatures do not suit the state bird in February (for even the state bird cries out in central Ohio in February)?

It wasn't long before our locked looks were lost and they moved on to less windy perches. There I was, Bible in hand, Jesus grabbing my attention in Matthew 6 saying, "*What are you worried about? Even the birds of the air are fed and cared for by my father.*" Maybe I had heard it all wrong from the cardinals. Maybe they weren't talking complaining about the weather at all. Maybe they were swinging and singing a "good morning" song! Maybe they were telling me, "*We see your worry lines. Stop grimacing. We will be alright. . . .and while you are at it . . . pray for spring!*"

That is a lot to put on the gaze of the northern cardinal - male or female. Personally, I think this lovely couple was hoping for a few more sunflower seeds before their hefty neighbor - Mr. Squirrel - arose.

**But not to worry.** Before he speaks of worry, Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:21, "*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*" While this precedes our passage by three verses, it sets the stage for Matthew 6:24-34, whose summary statement is: "*No one is able to serve two masters. You are not able to serve God and wealth.*" Jesus knows that being split between two masters is, basically, a form of schizophrenia. (The word "schizophrenia" literally means "split mind".) Two masters will make competing demands. You can't follow them both. Thus, "*You cannot serve God and wealth*" is not a statement of moral judgment, or even moral

encouragement. It is rather a statement of simple fact. A person **is not able** (*dunatai*) to serve to competing claims on their life.

"You are *not able* to serve God and *mamona*," or "mammon." The word *mamona* is Aramaic in origin and appears to have its root in "What is trusted in." It later came to mean "treasure" and then "wealth" or "worldly possessions," which is how it is used in the New Testament. *Mamona* should be seen in the context of 6:21. "Mammon" itself is that "treasure" that holds our heart, which is why worldly possessions and wealth are in fundamental conflict with service to God.

With a solid foundation of laying out the facts which say a person cannot serve two masters, Jesus offers six injunctions not to worry in the next 10 verses. He offers six negative uses of *merimnao*, which means anxiety, worry, full of cares, consumed with distractions. With "mammon" as our "treasure," we'll never have a moment's rest. We'll always be worrying about holding on to what we have or trying to get more.

The great Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once defined anxiety as "the next day." We don't know what will happen "the next day," which creates anxiety this day. Leo Buscaglia, the love doctor of the 80s said it this way: "Worry never robs tomorrow of its sorrow, it only saps today of its joy." Worry is like the bass in the symphony, it keeps a steady sound moving under the music of our daily lives.

With worry as our guiding light, we become stuck in the darkness. We become consumed on "this day" with trying to anticipate future calamities against which to protect ourselves. Since there can be no end to the calamities we can anticipate (the mind is a powerful friend and sometimes enemy), we're always uncertain and constantly chasing after **some thing** which, we hope, will decrease our level of uncertainty. This never works. Acquiring things doesn't reduce anxiety. It increases anxiety.

We accumulate things which really don't make us happier - cars, gadgets, homes, the latest phones and their "apps." These things don't decrease anxiety. They often lead us to seek after less

tangible forms of security, like popularity (real or socially networked) and beauty (botoxed and store bought creams). We are all searching for purpose and meaning in life, but so often, in the words of the old country song, *We are looking for love in the all the wrong places*. As the search continues, we eventually come to rest in the truth that Jesus spoke: You can't serve two masters. So we return and ask, "What does the God side of this equation splitting 'God and mammon' look like?"

Jesus lays out that the answer is knowing that God is present in our lives. He says, "*Do not be anxious for your life (psyche)*." Psyche means "life" or "soul," or, even better, "the essence of life" or "true life." (We get our word "psychology" from *psyche*.) He is saying, despite our very real needs, true life is not about food, or drink or clothes. True life comes first through the kingdom, the earthly application of which would mean food and clothing for everyone. The birds of the heaven and the lilies of the field are cared for by God. We will be too.

In speaking to a people for whom 75% were barely able to survive day to day, Jesus was not living in a bubble. He was looking into the faces of the poor and oppressed when he spoke these words. He knew most of those before him wondered where their food, clothing, and drink would come from on that given day. While he was not trying to offer a spiritual pill to those of us who embody and carry our anxiety as a daily weapon against ourselves, he nevertheless was speaking to us.

While he was clear about people's needs to trust in God to guide them, he was also keenly aware of the powers that sought to strip away what little they had. As a result, he called them (and calls us) to seek first "the kingdom, and its justice, and all these things will be added to you." *Dikaiosyne* may be translated "righteousness" or "justice." Translating as "righteousness" is often understood in terms of personal morality. The context makes clear that Jesus' concern is more social justice than individual sanctity. Indeed, for Jesus, this is nearly always the case.

When the kingdom is lived on earth – that is, when all people have dignity, when open table fellowship is practiced by all,

when hierarchy is upended, when all people are treated as beloved by God – then indeed there will be peace and plenty and more than enough for everyone.

In other words, if we are going to be anxious about anything, we should be anxious when the God's kingdom values of justice for all are too often eroded and threatened.

For the past two weeks, we have watched men and women who have taught our children with excellence, administered justice on the streets of our city, and put out the fires in our towns crying out for fairness and justice at the Statehouse. We have even seen folks locked out of “the people's house” last week as they attempted to present their arguments against a bill that will take away their right to negotiate contracts. They are crying out and speaking out and asking, “Is this really about saving money in the state's budget or is it about breaking unions while turning upside-down the organized public sector workers' rights for collective bargaining?”

For those of us who have weathered strikes among teachers, public employees and others, we know what effect those will have on our communities. Having grown up in a family where my mother and siblings were protected by unions, I have witnessed the world without collective bargaining. My senior year in high school our teachers went out on strike – including my mother. When things got ugly, when citizens got ugly, they said and did things to hurt our teachers – people who rose early each day to serve our community's children – and did it with superb excellence and compassion.

It true that it takes a village to raise and care for our children and at the center of this village are our educators, firefighters, police officers and so many others who lay down their lives for us. So, the anticipation and anxiety is real. It gives cause to worry - in all of our households - not the least of which are those among us who are our teachers, firefighters, police officers and more. We must find a way to compromise or “the next day” will be stormy, to say the least.

As we behold the “Friendship Window,” maybe Dr. Gladden’s admonition to work in relationship and build friendships across dividing lines in the human family is all we really need.

When God’s kingdom reigns, people live without anxiety over "the next day." According to Jesus, there's plenty of divisions to go around right now, today, this minute. He names this, rejects this, and reframes it in the nature of peoples' daily reality: “Your overlord tells you that God blesses the current arrangements? This is not so. Rather, God is for justice and so we should live into this non-anxious truth.”

If you don’t believe this, take a look out your window and see the northern cardinals finding their way through this winter of discontent to a spring that we need soon. Amen.

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