

With a Capital T

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Matthew 6:24-34

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Matthew 6:24-34

“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. You cannot serve God and wealth.
²⁵“Therefore I tell you, 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? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.



Ya Got Trouble – “The Music Man” (1957)

People:

Trouble, oh we got trouble,
Right here in River City!
With a capital "T"
That rhymes with "P"
And that stands for Pool,
That stands for pool.

We've surely got trouble!
Right here in River City,
Right here!
Gotta figger out a way
To keep the young ones moral after school!
Trouble, trouble, trouble, trouble, trouble...

Harold Hill:

Mothers of River City!
Heed the warning before it's too late!
Watch for the tell-tale sign of corruption!
The moment your son leaves the house,
Does he rebuckle his knickerbockers below the knee?
Is there a nicotine stain on his index finger?
A dime novel hidden in the corn crib?
Is he starting to memorize jokes from Capt.
Billy's Whiz Bang?
Are certain words creeping into his conversation?
Words like 'swell?'
And 'so's your old man?'
Well, if so my friends,
Ya got trouble,
Right here in River city!
With a capital "T"
And that rhymes with "P"
And that stands for Pool.
We've surely got trouble!
Right here in River City!
Remember the Maine, Plymouth Rock and the Golden
Rule!
Oh, we've got trouble.
We're in terrible, terrible trouble.
That game with the fifteen numbered balls is a devil's tool!
Oh yes we got trouble, trouble, trouble!
With a "T"! Gotta rhyme it with "P"!
And that stands for Pool!!!

Trouble ... trouble ... trouble ... trouble ...

“Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

Trouble ... trouble ... trouble ... trouble ...

But Jesus, we got Trouble. Trouble with a capital T! And it’s more than just a pool table in the local billiard hall. We have 10% unemployment, housing sales are down, foreclosures are up, healthcare and health insurance costs are off the chart, we’re trying to get back on our feet after the worst financial crisis in recent memory. We’re watching the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and we seem to get more and more afraid of each other.

Trouble ... trouble ... trouble ... trouble ...

“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?”

Trouble ... trouble ... trouble ... trouble ...

But Jesus, sometimes the news scares us. It seems like crime and terror own the day, we’re involved in two wars overseas and political posturing at home, Arab nations seem to be imploding daily, floods and disasters constantly hit us, times are hard, technology changes faster than we can keep up, sometimes it feels like life is spinning out of control, like the end of the world is near.

Trouble ... trouble ... trouble ... trouble ...

“Do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the [unbelievers] who strive for all these things; and indeed your [God in heaven] knows that you need all these things.”

Trouble ... trouble ... trouble ... trouble ...

These are easy words to read, aren’t they? Easy words to hear when we read them as sacred text, speak them as words of Jesus who we trust, who we believe is our messiah, who we tell the world is the son of God. These are easy words to read and hear but they are not easy words to live.

How am I supposed to not worry about my life and my needs when I have bills to pay and a family to feed? How do I survive in a capitalistic economy when I’m nowhere near the top of the dog pile and it doesn’t seem like I’m ever going to be a thousand-aire let alone a millionaire?

What do you hear when you hear Jesus speaking these words? Some people have read this to mean that we don’t have to do anything and that God will just give us everything we need. Some read it to mean that only believers will get what they need, that unbelievers are going to suffer not only now but in heaven. Some read it to justify keeping the poor poor – if God wanted you to not be poor you wouldn’t be poor – and that God has created certain categories and we should be happy with our life as it is. Some read it to mean whatever you ask for God will give you. You want a Mercedes? All you have to do is believe and ask and be faithful enough and you’ll get. You didn’t get it? I guess you weren’t faithful enough.

Bill McKibben, in a *Harper's* magazine essay, "The Christian Paradox," wrote that “Three quarters of Americans believe the Bible teaches that 'God helps those who help themselves.' That is, three out of four Americans believe that this uber-American idea, a notion at the core of our current individualist politics and culture, which was in fact uttered by Ben Franklin, actually appears in Holy Scripture. The thing is, not only is Franklin's wisdom not biblical; it's counter-biblical. Few ideas could be further from the gospel message, with its radical summons to love of neighbor.”

The Gospel that Matthew has Jesus preaching to us as the Sermon on the Mount these past few weeks is about more than what we will eat or drink or wear. The message from the Sermon on the Mount is about a depth of love far beyond almost anything that we would ever think of if left to our own devices. If we never heard the message of Jesus I suspect we would be clawing our way to the top of the competitive heap and leaving behind anyone that can't keep up. But that's not the Jesus message, is it?

I have to be at Philadelphia International Airport at 4 am on Tuesday morning so I can catch a 6 am flight to Miami. Now, anyone that knows me even just a little bit knows that I am not a morning person and that I don't function very well until about Noon so getting on a plane at 6 am is a major accomplishment and I do it only because I truly believe that what Jesus is talking about in this collection of sayings requires us to do things like this.

In 1492 Christopher Columbus landed on an island that he renamed Hispaniola. He met the residents of the island, the Tainos, and immediately assumed that he could control them. "They are fit to be ordered about and made to work, to sow and do everything else that may be needed," wrote Columbus on December 16, 1492. It's been estimated that in 1492 there were 8 million Tainos living in the island; within twenty years there were fewer than 28,000; by 1542 there were only 200 Tainos left alive.

Talk about Trouble with a capital T. And this trouble was brought to these peaceable people by a European who claimed to be doing it on behalf of this very same Jesus that tells us there's nothing to worry about.

Three hundred years later, in 1792, the enslaved people living in the French colony on that same island, most of them brought as captives from the West African coast, rose up in revolt against those who claimed to be their owners. In 1804, Toussaint L'Ouverture, claimed victory over Napoleon, forced the French out, and created the independent and free country of Ayiti, or as we

know it today, Haiti. The first free, independent, nation of people of color in the Western Hemisphere.

That made a lot of white people unhappy and it sparked another two centuries of racist policies by the United States and other Western powers that made Haiti a free country that has never been free. From 1802 and Thomas Jefferson's immediate embargo against Haiti and his refusal to grant it diplomatic recognition to the 2004 Bush Administration's direct hand in the kidnapping and removal of democratically-elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Haiti has been mistreated and forced into submission by every powerful nation that it has dealt with. After it defeated France and gained its independence, France demanded 150 million francs extortion or it would re-enslave the Haitians. Haiti paid the demand over the next 30 years – in 2003 it won an international law suit and was awarded a \$21 billion judgment against France which neither France nor the US was very happy about.

Trouble with a capital T? This is a country with Trouble. Haitians have much to really worry about that we might only pretend to worry about. Food, drink, clothing? They have reason to worry. Haiti is economically the poorest country in the Americas with a 50% unemployment rate. It's nearly impossible to identify all of the root causes of Haiti's trouble – political oppression throughout its history, racism and color discrimination with white and lighter skinned Haitians dominating the infrastructure, only a few thousand families own most of any wealth in the country, corruption and illiteracy keep the poor oppressed, overpopulation of a very small island, deforestation of its hills for charcoal to be used as fuel, lack of agricultural development, 80% of the population lives in absolute poverty.

This is trouble ... with a capital T.

And then last January a massive earthquake rumbled through this troubled country – 316,000 people died, 300,000 were injured, and 1,000,000 were made homeless; 250,000 residences and

30,000 commercial buildings collapsed or were severely damaged. This is why I'm getting on a 6 am flight to Miami and then on to Port au Prince on Tuesday morning. This is why I had inoculations to avoid yellow fever and typhoid and am taking medication against malaria. This is why I am willing to risk cholera and face some unknown unknowns and push past what might be an American comfort-zone. I go because Jesus reminds me that I need not worry what tomorrow brings for me but I do need to worry about what today brings for my brothers and sisters.

When I went to Haiti in 1995 I found people with very little financial means, very little to celebrate, almost nothing to promise them a future. But their faith. They shared their food, they shared their homes, they shared their stories, they shared their prayers, they shared their smiles, they shared with me the love that they know from the Jesus that we each hear in this Sermon on the Mount.

God feeds us. God clothes us. God cares for us just as God cares for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. God loves us, so must we love one another.

Randall Robinson in his book, *An Unbroken Agony*, summarizes the Haitian people's political resilience in this way reminding us that we, in the wealthy world, have been taught a narrow definition of poverty. We see someone's worn out clothes and lack of possessions and less than three meals a day as an indication of poverty yet these "poor" people survive and are very much alive:

Haitian peasants may have few material possessions to speak of, but they knew what their slave ancestors had done to the French, to the English, and to the Spanish. They also knew what they had done to liberate all of Latin America, as well as themselves. No matter how poor they were, the Haitians knew this about themselves, things that made them special to themselves, that made them

resilient and independent, that gave them great art, that unsettled, even now, those nations the peasants' slave ancestors had once soundly thrashed. In the last analysis, the knowledge of one's own foundation story may be the most consoling, indeed, the most empowering form of wealth there is – a wealth more sustaining over time than all the worldly goods one could conceive of.

But when I was in Haiti in 1995 I found more than political resilience. I found a depth of spiritual wealth that I never expected. I met with a peasant association which had organized itself to better agricultural practices, developed a plan for reforestation, ran a school, created a credit union for small loans, and was trying to help reduce some of that abject financial poverty. I was hosted by two Catholic sisters who ran an orphanage and taught in the school – I fell in love with Shela, a 5 year old little girl with a bad skin infection on her arms who needed eye surgery to correct a condition which my daughter Lindsay had had corrected just a few years before – I wanted so much to bring her home. (In a hospital in Port au Prince earlier that week I had cradled in my arms a tiny little infant who had hydrocephalus like Lindsay had had at birth – a head the size of a large cantaloupe – a baby that clearly not many people were willing to hold. It's a wonder that I don't now have these two children as part of my family!)

We walked down hills lined with banana trees along narrow paths to a small cluster of brightly painted houses where out front people had gathered for a prayer service – we sang and prayed and laughed and hugged – we concluded our worship that evening praying the Lord's Prayer, they in Kreyole, we in English. I knew at that moment that I would return to this spiritual place so that I could better deepen my own relationship with God and so I could know better this call of Jesus to stop our worry.

You see, 1500 miles from here is a spiritually rich place where my heart was touched 16 years ago and I have never been the same since. So Tuesday I go back – back to a place that will look very different physically from the place I left, back to a physically devastated place which, it's hard to believe, has been even more devastated. Please don't misunderstand. I don't want to romanticize Haiti as if it's some spiritual paradise where no trouble exists. The destruction and despair will be palpable and reentry back home after a week will be difficult. But I know that my heart will be moved again during my time there.

Should I be worried? Maybe. But I'm not.

“No one can serve two masters; ... You cannot serve God and wealth.”

I choose to serve the God who calls me to Haiti.

“Strive first for the kingdom of God and [God's] righteousness ... do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.”

I choose to not worry today or tomorrow because I know God calls me to Haiti.

I ask for your prayers ... with a capital P and that rhymes with ...

Well, it doesn't really have to rhyme with anything, does it?

I ask for your prayers ...

Amen.