

25 May 2008
Pentecost 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Whose Really Serving Who?

Text: Matthew 6:24-34 (Isaiah 49:8-16a; Romans 1:8-17)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

“*You cannot serve God and money,*” Jesus told us today. The old (and better) translations for the word money in that verse was *mammon* – meaning all the things and possessions of this world and life. *Food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods.* (Small Catechism, Explanation to the Fourth Petition) Only one thing can have first place in your life – God, or something else. And so with these words, Jesus issues a challenge to you today, and asks: which will it be? Whom will you serve: God, or mammon?

It may seem odd asking that question in a church where most of you are here every Sunday, and where you give very generously to the work of this church, and to many other special causes! Of course (you have shown), the answer is God! *That’s why you’re here.* . . . But oh, that it were that easy! For while we know what the answer *should* be, is that always the case with us? Or do our thoughts, words, deeds, and desires betray something else lurking within us? For consider: what informs your thoughts and opinions and fills your mind more: the Word or the world? Where do you look for the answers to your problems, or to satisfy your desires: to prayer or to power and possessions? What do you most often crave and covet: God, or gold? When push comes to shove, who or what most often gets pushed and shoved out of the way: God or mammon?

If you’re like me, you don’t like the answers to those questions that came up in your mind! And put in those ways, the challenge becomes a bit more difficult, does it not? **The saint in you**, born of water and the Spirit in Holy Baptism, knows the answer and wants to live in righteousness and faith, and do the right things . . . while **the sinner in you** fights against that faith and those holy desires, and makes you doubt and worry and fear and chase after the things of this world for your satisfaction and security. And so Jesus’ challenge today is issued not just so that we

know the right answer, but to reveal to us the battle that rages inside each and every one of us. The battle that is fought not just on Sundays, but each and every day of our lives. The battle where ground zero in this spiritual war is not out there, but in here – in your heart.

And if you doubt the seriousness or importance of this battle, just look at the carnage that lies all around us. Children who grow up without fathers who are working all the time. Mothers who abort their babies to pursue their careers. Lawsuits between family and friends, and fighting over inheritances. Coveting that has led to unmanageable debt and now housing foreclosures. Jealousy and rivalry has led to increasing isolation and competition. Teenagers have been killed for brand name jackets and shoes. Investment schemes think nothing of putting the retirement funds of many in jeopardy to serve the desires of a few. And if you're thinking to yourself "*I'm not that bad*" (and maybe you're not), the warning to us today is that it is the *same* sin that is in your heart; the *same* bowing down to the false gods of this world; the *same* struggle that divides you, that left to grow and flower produces these things. A heart deadened in sin. A heart turned in on itself. A heart that thinks not: *if I do this what will happen to my neighbor*, but that thinks: *if I don't do this, what will happen to me?*

Mammon is a ruthless and insatiable god.

So what is the answer? How do we answer the challenge? How do we win the battle raging within each of us? Do we try harder? Become more dedicated? Resolve to do better? No, none of these. Because as I have said from this pulpit before, most of you, if not all of you, have tried that already – and it hasn't worked. Maybe for a little while it did, but then the cares and concerns and challenges of this life overwhelmed, and the attacks of satan increased, and the demands and desires welled up . . . and all your strength and all your sincerity, could not do it. Or as Jesus put it: "*Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?*"

There is only one solution: **to die**. For you cannot give yourself life, and the rebellious, self-centered sinner in us cannot be changed or improved or reformed – it must die a death that leads to a new life. And so in this battle between God and mammon, we win the fight not by relying on our own strength, but falling on our knees in repentance, and relying on the strength and power of the death and resurrection of Christ. For as we heard from St. Paul today: "*the Gospel [of the death and resurrection of Christ] is the power of God.*" The Gospel is the power of God that

forgives the sin in us. The power of God that raises a new man in us. The power of God that strengthens and keeps us. The power of God that changes the focus of our lives. The power of God that gives us the victory over the things of this world that cause us to worry and be anxious and work ourselves to death. The cross is the power of God - the death that leads to life. The only one that does.

For life isn't just about getting what we *need* in this world, or using God to get what we *want* in this world - is that really all there is? Or is Jesus today focusing our eyes on a bigger picture? Beyond the near-sightedness of this world, to a life which doesn't mean rejecting the things of this world, but having them and using them and enjoying them in a good way. A life where they serve us, not where we serve them! A life that transcends what I own, or what I can control. A life that I live now, but which will not end in 70, 80, or 100 years.

That is the life that Jesus has come to restore to us. To set us free from our slavery to and idolatry of the things of this world, to set us free from our lusts and desires, and give us something greater. A life that is full and joyful with much or with little; in good times or in bad; when the road is smooth or when it is rocky. And yes, life that not even death can end.

That is the life of Christ, here for you. The life and resurrection given to you each time your sins are forgiven. The life and resurrection given to you each time you eat the body and drink the blood of Jesus here in His Supper. The life and resurrection given to you as Christ Himself comes here to serve you, to take you, and to raise you. To raise you to a life in this world but not of this world. To give you that life that so many seek, but cannot find, because they are looking in the wrong places. For there is only one place where that life can be found - in the One who created us, who has come to redeem us, and now still comes to sanctify us. Only the One who is life can give life, and that is the very thing He has come to do! Taking our death in His death, and restoring our life in His life. Not the same old life, but a new life.

And how appropriate that we think on such things on this Memorial Day weekend - the day our nation has set aside to remember those who have served our country and given their lives that we may live in freedom and peace. Today we remember the One whose death won freedom for us from sin, death, and the devil. The One who established peace not just between nations, but between God and man. The One who came onto the battlefield we created, to end the war, once and for all. And for all this He won no medals or special honors - He won you. And you He remembers

not one day a year, but each and every day and moment of your life! For as He said through the prophet Isaiah today: "*I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.*" And you can be sure that those hands with memorial holes, that came to serve, serve you still.

So whom will you serve: God or mammon? We started with that question, but look where we ended - with God serving us, in Christ Jesus. And that is how it should be. For only when He serves us, can we then serve Him.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.