

sermon-5/25/08 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Anxiety’s Limits”
Matt. 6:24-34

Today we baptized Theo Gaugel. I love baptisms. They are such a tender, meaningful sacrament. They are also filled with some pretty serious implications. Let’s take a closer look at what we mean when we baptize a little child.

First, baptism is not necessary for salvation. It is not as if God loves a baptized child more than one who has not been baptized. It is not as if we need to quickly baptize our children just in case something dreadful might happen before they are baptized. Baptism is not some magical rite that protects our children from harm, or that makes sure they will get into heaven.

Rather, baptism is a sign and a seal. It is a sign that the person baptized has been incorporated into Christ and the new community we call the Church. It is the sacrament of belonging, of becoming part of an extended family.

When we baptize we remember that our becoming part of the Church is first, and foremost, at God’s initiative. God comes to us before we ever reach out to God. When God reaches out, we are given the opportunity to respond or not. When parents baptize their children they are promising to raise them to recognize God in their life and to respond positively. By promising to raise their child in the church, they are allowing this community of faith to help them in that process.

Once we are baptized, we live out the rest of our lives in the context of our baptism. When life gets tough, we are urged to remember that we belong to God. We do not need to fear. That is why we anoint with oil at our baptisms. Then, when we anoint with oil at other times in life, especially at very difficult times, we remember that we belong to God. God is with us. Nothing will change that. Not even death.

Baptism has political overtones as well. When parents baptize their children they promise to raise them to make their loyalty to Christ their primary loyalty. This loyalty is even greater than our loyalty to our beloved country. Heaven forbid it should ever happen, but if we come to a time in our lives when we have to choose between being a faithful disciple to Christ and being an obedient citizen, we should choose the former.

There have been Christians down through history who have had to make such a difficult decision. When they were afraid to choose loyalty to Christ, and instead, chose to be obedient citizens, some pretty horrible things happened. Just ask those persecuted in Nazi Germany when so many Christians chose to be obedient to Hitler!

When we baptized Theo today we asked Stefanie, Dan, and the congregation to make promises. We promised to raise Theo in the church. We promised to help instill kingdom values in his heart. What are those values?

We could spend many sermons talking about what those values might be. Today we will look at two of them lifted up to us in our Matthew text. These few verses in Matthew, chapter six, are part of what we have come to call The Sermon on the Mount.

In our section of the sermon, scholars tell us Jesus was trying to teach how we might live out our “obedience to God in daily life with an unreserved commitment” to be his disciple above all else. That is what we hope to teach Theo as he grows up in the Church.

Jesus says we can’t serve two masters. We have to decide between God and money. This is a very basic decision we all have to make. It is a decision, I suspect, we have to affirm almost on a daily basis. It cuts to the heart of what it means to be a Christian.

One commentator said, “The worship of God is tied to one’s attitudes toward wealth.” That is because “whatever one places his or her confidence in becomes one’s god.” My guess would be that you have heard this kind of teaching before. It is one that crops up in stewardship sermons almost every year. It is not a teaching we like to hear.

Most of us simply don’t want to decide between two masters. Some think they are their own masters. They don’t serve anyone but themselves. Those who believe that, of course, are only kidding themselves. We all serve one, or several masters. That is how we prefer it. We want to serve a particular master in one situation in life, and then serve another master in another situation, depending on the day and what makes us feel most comfortable and secure.

Unfortunately, Jesus says you can’t do that. You can’t serve God and money at the same time. If we serve God, it will affect how we handle money. If we serve money, it will affect how faithful we can be as a disciple of Jesus.

When we baptized Theo, we promised to help him choose God as his master. He will only choose to do that if we model for him what that choice looks like in our own behavior. It is not just Stefanie and Daniel’s responsibility to model that. It is all of our responsibility!

I am reminded of a cartoon I saw in the paper recently. We see a mother and father tied to a chair and a little boy, around 7 or 8, playing a video game in the same room. The mother says to the little boy, “I can’t believe you did this Timmy. I thought your nanny raised you better than that!”

When we baptize a child we promise not to let the culture be the nanny, so to speak. We don’t want our children to be raised as loyal children of the culture. Instead, we promise to instill the values we hold dear as the church. This is a parental responsibility, to be sure, but it is also the responsibility of everyone in the church.

The other teaching in this section of Matthew is about anxiety. Interestingly, there is a connection between who we serve and how much we worry. I think that is why Matthew put these two teachings together. Luke does not do that in his gospel.

Jesus says there are two very good reasons not to worry. First, God will provide. Choose to follow God, trust God, and live out of that context, and you will have enough. Sounds easy, but we know better. Trusting God is the work of a lifetime.

Secondly, don't worry because some things are simply beyond our control. Jesus asks, "And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" There are limits to how much power worry has to protect us or help us. That seems obvious, but many of us live as if our worrying will help. We think if we don't worry, something is going to catch us by surprise and really mess up our plans. If we stop worrying about one thing, we find another to take its place. Life doesn't feel normal if we aren't worrying. Jesus says that is no way to live. It betrays a lack of trust in God.

When we baptized Theo, we promised to help him come to terms with his anxiety so that he does not make decisions out of that anxiety, but rather out of trust. Anxiety is really only another form of fear. The gospels are very clear that fear is a terrible emotion to guide our decisions.

The world desperately needs adults that are compassionate, generous, and who have their priorities guided by kingdom values. The world needs adults who don't respond out of their anxiety and their need to feel safe.

When the church baptizes children they are giving the world a gift. We promise to nurture children in kingdom values. We promise to become a school of compassion teaching children to be kind and not stingy or forever grasping for more. We promise to raise children to not be seduced by money and end up worshipping an idol instead of the God of the universe. It is a great calling for parents and for the church. Amen