

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I probably have about 110 sermons in me on this passage: “No one can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” What a terrible temptation for a Pastor! Here is a great opportunity to talk about how our love of money and all it can buy gets in the way of our loving God, and I have, as I said, at least 110 ways to say it. But that’s not what the Lord has put in my heart to speak about today.

Now, Church, it’s your turn to say with great relief, “Thank you, Jesus!”

Instead, I would like to continue the conversation we’ve been having these past few weeks about love. Last week I spoke on the Lord’s calling us to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect by learning to love as God loves. The week before that I suggested that we reflect on the reality that we are all God’s children and none of us can look on another as “Other”. Rather, we are all called to love each other as members of the family of God. Prior to that I taught that God made us to know him, to love him, to serve him, and to be happy with him in this life and the next, with our priority in coming to know who God is as he revealed himself to be—God is love.

Today I ask you to take a moment and remember the first moment that you realized that you are loved. Can you remember that moment? Can you place yourself in that moment?

For me, that moment came when I was five or six years old. I remember it like it was yesterday. It was a cool, sunny day in the early Fall, leaves were beginning to turn and the brilliance of their reds and golds and browns shimmered like stained glass as they floated on the breeze. Somehow I managed to be home alone with my Mom. Since I don’t remember feeling bad, I probably feigned some illness (as I was capable of doing), that kept me from going to school. My Mother was hanging the laundry, as I remember sheets and towels and the like. I remember this because they were billowing gently in the wind. I was stretched out on one of those old-fashioned gliders, and when she was finished hanging the laundry, my Mother came over, rested my head in her lap, and gently stroked my head (back then I had a full head of blonde, curly hair). We didn’t speak. She just held me and continued to stroke my head. It may only have been for a moment, but it seemed like a very long time. It was at least long enough for me to feel completely and unconditionally loved. I believe that moment determined to some large extent the course of my life.

This belief is supported by the work of the highly respected psychologist, Erik Erikson. He taught that during the first stages of our lives, we either developed a sense of trust or a sense of mistrust about our environment. And throughout our lives, how we respond to life will be affected by which dominates our life—trust or mistrust. If we encounter unconditional love as young children, according to Erikson, we develop trust that sets the stage for a lifelong perception of the world as a good and pleasant place.

Unfortunately, many parents are not able to express unconditional love, because they did not receive unconditional love when they were young. It's nobody's fault. It's simply a fact. Many parents are themselves emotionally limited.

God, recognizing this frailty of human nature, addresses this reality in the beautiful Word he speaks to us today through the Prophet, Isaiah: "Can a Mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you."

Please, my dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, here these magnificent words of God's unconditional love for you, "Can a Mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you."

Without an experience of unconditional love early in our lives, it is likely we grew up to be mistrustful and insecure. Many of us have a susceptibility to stress and worry built into our very personalities.

It is to those among us that are afflicted with stress, anxiety, depression, insomnia, and other signs of insecurity, tension, and hopelessness (and from time to time, that includes just about all of us), that Jesus addresses this teaching: "...I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?"

He then goes on to offer examples from nature—the birds of the sky and the flowers in the field—of God's unconditional love: "If God so clothes the grass of the field, which grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you? So do not worry and say, 'What are we to eat?' or 'What are we to drink?' or 'What are we to wear?' Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all...Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself."

Jesus even offers us a prescription how we can lay down all the stresses, the anxieties, the fears, the depressions, and the insecurities of our day-to-day lives. He says simply, "...seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides."

The question, therefore, is how to do that—seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness—that will overcome our all-consuming worries?

Please forgive me, but I can only refer back to my own experience. Having experienced the unconditional love of my Mother, and Dad too, at an early age, I grew up wanting to please them. When I misbehaved or got in trouble or didn't do my work, whether it be chores or homework; when I fought with my sisters or got in fights at school or cut classes or did any of the things that I knew I wasn't supposed to do and didn't do the things I knew were

expected of me, my parents didn't holler and scream at me. They never hit or beat me. They simply let me know that I had let them down. I had disappointed them. And it crushed me!

I remember in my sophomore year of high school, I had made the football team. We practiced or played every day after school. I came home, ate my dinner, took my shower, said I was going to do my homework, closed my door, and went right to bed. I was exhausted. That first quarter, I flunked every subject.

I brought home my report card totally petrified. I showed it to my Mother. She simply handed it back to me with tears in her eyes and told me to show it to my Dad when he got home. You talk about stress and anxiety? I was physically shivering inside and out.

My Dad looked at the report card, shook his head, and quietly said, "Well, that's the end of football. Turn in your equipment tomorrow." I said, "Yes, Sir!" I was so relieved not to be dead.

The following week, since my Dad had to work at night, my Mother had to accompany me and meet with all my teachers whose classes I failed and listen to them proclaim me to be a lazy lout. On the bus on the way home, she took my hand in hers and said gently, "Don't ever put me through that again."

I spent the rest of my high school career on or near being on the honor roll. Why? Because I didn't want to hurt my parents; I recognized they did everything for me; I didn't want to betray their unconditional love. I chose to succeed to honor that love first and foremost in my life.

That's what Jesus is urging us to do when he says, "...seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides." Trust in His Love. Trust Him to provide for you more than He does the birds of the sky and the lilies in the field. Trust Him enough and your worries and your fears; your anxieties and your insecurities will fade more and more from your consciousness as you seek to please Him to honor His unconditional love for you.

It really is as simple as that. Put God first in your life and you'll never have to worry again. These are His Words to you today, "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you."