

In our Gospel reading for this morning, Jesus lays out a pretty clear choice: serve God, or serve money. If you choose one, you might feel empowered and free, but you'll quickly find that anxiety never really leaves. If you choose the other, you'll realize that Lord of heaven and earth is watching over you, and that everything He knows you need, He'll give to you – and nothing can stop Him. That's the choice that lies before every person called by the Gospel.

Now, before we look at those choices and their consequences, we need to address another question: what does it mean to serve? It's a bit of a complex issue, but at its root we could perhaps say that, if you are serving something or someone, you are being guided, even controlled, by that thing or person. A servant does what his master tells him to do, not what he wants to do.

The distinction between serving God and serving money is then ultimately one of the heart. What's in the heart flows outward into the words and actions, and so sometimes it's pretty clear who a person serves. But other times, not so much. You can have rich people who serve God, such as Abraham or Job, and you can have poor people who serve money.

So rather than try to draw a clear line in the sand, I'll give you some questions to reflect on, to consider what it means to serve. When a problem comes up, is the first thing that goes through your head a prayer to God, asking Him what to do and requesting His help, or is it the question of "How am I going to pay for this?" or "How much will this cost me?"

Another question might be this: how do you spend your time? Or, what does your effort and energy go into? Is it in seeking to draw closer to God, and to carry out the various tasks He's given you to do in His Word, such as caring for your family and friends, seeking to help those in need, and so forth. Or is it in pursuing an every greater number in your bank account, or chasing after those things that money can buy that you think will make you happy: toys, houses, experiences, things of pleasure?

Maybe one last question: when the two come into conflict, which one wins out? Which one is the thing that needs addressed first, and which is the one that'll still be there later, after the more important thing's been taken care of? We might like to think we can have both, have our cake and eat it too, but Jesus' words are about as clear as clear can be: "You cannot serve God and money."

Now, looking at which of the two you should serve, it's obvious that the right answer, the Christian answer, is to serve God. What is it, then, that makes serving money such a tempting thing? I think it's temptation is found in the lie that we think we won't actually serve money. With money, we think we're in control.

After all, money's just an inanimate object, a number on a bank statement, an abstract concept about stored work. But it's not a living thing, an entity that would tell us what to do. With money, then, I can do as I please. I'm still in control. I can do with it whatever I want, when I want.

If those last couple sentences struck you as things people with addiction often say, then you're realizing what makes money such a dangerous master. Like the initial hit of a drug or other addictive substance, getting money feels good. We get money and we think of what we could do with it, how we could use it to get what we want. We get to be in charge. We get to have power.

But the problem with this is – again, like a drug – the good feeling never lasts. The money never goes quite as far as we'd want it to. The things we're able to do with it or buy with it are never quite as good as we'd hoped. And when the money's gone, spent on whatever, we're left with anxiety, worrying when the next check will arrive, and will it be enough, and what will happen if it isn't?

It's this combination of temporary pleasure and subsequent anxiety that turn money from something we think we have power over into something we end up serving. It feels nice to see that number in the bank statement, to sit behind the wheel of the new SUV, to open the door to that hotel suite, to walk out of the store with your new purchase. It feels good.

But then the feeling fades, and you want it again, and more. And so you start to sacrifice other things – time with family, time in church, time caring for others – in order to chase after that high. You end up serving the thing you thought you were in control of.

And when it falls short, and you're left with that anxiety, it begins to control your actions as well. If you're in control, then you are also responsible. It's up to you to make sure you've got enough food, and a roof over your head, and enough saved up for retirement, and adequate health insurance, and a sufficient emergency fund, and paying down all your debts... and it's all on you.

In an effort to eliminate or at least reduce that anxiety, you start to sacrifice things, the same things sacrificed to chase after the pleasure, because in the end the god of money demands those sacrifices. But they'll never be enough. And often, by the time you realize what you've sacrificed to chase after something that could never satisfy, the damage is done.

But the thing is, God didn't create us for that. He doesn't desire us to constantly be afflicted with anxiety, to constantly be chasing after things that leave us empty. No, He created us to be with Him, to be joined to Him, to share in His life, His love, His peace, for eternity.

That's why He took on flesh, died on the cross, and rose from the dead: to pay the price for our sins and reconcile us to Himself again. We like sheep had gone astray, and so our Good Shepherd came to gather us into His flock again, even laying down His life out of love for us.

That great gift that He won for us on the cross He then gives to us through His Word and His Sacraments. Today, we got to witness this happen in Bianca's Baptism. There in the waters, Jesus blessed her just as He blessed all those little children brought to Him while He walked this earth. At the font, Bianca was given the circumcision made without hands, as St. Paul describes it, joined to His people of all times and places.

Bianca, you can hear the wonderful promise of Jesus in Mark 16, that whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved, and know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus' promises there is for you. You are His child, and He is your Father, your Savior, Your Comforter – Your God.

These promises are for all who believe and are baptized. And the promises aren't just for eternity, either. Because God – not money – is your God, you can trust in His promises to care for in this life, to provide everything you need until the day when He calls you to His beautiful house in heaven. Because He is your God, Jesus says, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life."

You don't need to be anxious, because everything is in God's almighty hands. Those are the hands that provide for the birds of the heavens, those birds that don't worry about what tomorrow will bring, but just do what God has given them to do today. They eat what God puts before them, and make nests with what He provides for them, and sing the songs that God has written in their hearts.

If God cares even for the countless birds, how much more will He care for those made in His image? We can go about our lives knowing that each moment is established by the Lord. He knows what we need better than we do ourselves, and He will not fail to provide it. He knows all the dangers that are constantly around us – even ones we're unaware of – and He will not fail to protect us from them. And even in times when we come into hardship and even suffering, even then we can know that our God is in control of such times. He will use them for our good, and when their purpose has been fulfilled, He will not fail to deliver us from them.

As Christians, we can go about our daily work, not worrying that if we fail or fall short then we're doomed because it's all on us, but rather we go about it because God has given it to us to do, just as the birds are given to build nests and sing songs while relying completely on the Lord. We know that money is merely a tool given by God, and He will supply it as He knows is best.

As our Lord tells us in Ecclesiastes, "There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?" As the birds sing thanksgiving to God, how can we keep from singing?

When you serve God, you are freed from slavery to anxiety and to the things of this world. As Jesus says, the Father knows what you need, and He'll provide it. You are freed then to seek first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness, because you have His unbreakable promise, given in His word, and in Holy Baptism, that all that you need will be added unto you.

In the name of Jesus, amen.