

Church of the Servant, Wilmington, NC

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Some of you may have watched the TV show “The Dog Whisperer.” My favorite episode is when the dog trainer Cesar Millan is called to help with a dog that is too aggressive.

“I have Princess very well trained but sometimes she just gets upset.”

“Who does the dog try to attack?” Cesar asks.

“Well,” the owner replies, “mainly my wife.”

The TV crew proceeds to film the man demonstrating. He gets onto the couple’s double bed. The small fluffy dog lies down beside him. The wife moves slowly toward the bed but as soon as she touches it, the dog leaps toward her, yapping and snapping, and she jumps back, pressed against the wall.

“I just don’t know what to do,” the man says, “Gosh, I guess my wife just can’t sleep in the bed anymore.”

Cesar turns toward the camera and raises his eyebrows.

This man is not alone in thinking that he’s the one in charge when, really, the dog is in charge. Many of Cesar’s clients will say that they are the animal’s master but the dog’s behavior says something else. And the trainer reiterates his key idea: dogs are pack animals that need a leader. If there is no clear leader then the dog, by nature, becomes one.

I don’t think human beings are officially pack animals, but we do need leaders. These can be people or beliefs or ideas. We need a controlling force in our lives. We usually tell ourselves that our lives are controlled by high ideals or by God, but our behavior sometimes gives us away. We do well to examine our behavior from time to time and to ask ourselves what our actions say about who is in charge.

In today’s Gospel, that’s what Jesus is asking us to do. He mentions some of the forces in life that will try to take over our minds and souls, our thoughts and our energies, and asks us to think about whether they are more in charge of us than we think.

First of all, he mentions money. “You cannot serve two masters,” he says. “You cannot serve God and money.” He wants us to think about the place money takes in our lives. Is money a tool we use or is it a controlling force? Do we find ourselves always wanting more, needing more, hoarding more? When we should be focusing on God’s intentions for us, is money the little fluffy dog that comes yapping at us, upsetting our equilibrium?

Then Jesus goes on with other things that vie for our attention. “Are you worried about what you eat and drink?” he asks. “When you’re invited to someone’s house are you more interested in the quality of the wine and freshness of the salad than in getting to know the people more deeply?” And concern about food can be broadened into interest in all the finer things of life, the luxuries. It’s so easy to get caught up in needing the best—the latest TV or iphone or the newest energy-saving car.

And “Are you worried about what you will wear?” What if you have to wear “mom jeans” instead of “skinny jeans”? What if your clothes are from a lowbrow superstore instead of a designer boutique?

“Can you look in the mirror and cause any part of you to change?” Jesus asks. Does it drive you nuts that there is just no way your particular body or hair or face fits the present idea of beauty? They say you can never be too thin. Maybe that’s the same as saying you can never be thin enough.

Jesus is not talking about worrying about whether we will have *anything* to eat or *anything* to wear. He is asking us to take a look at what most occupies our thoughts, our worries, and our charge cards. “And which of you, by worrying, can lengthen his life?” Perhaps it is fear of our mortality that yaps at us— Jesus says, “Are you trying—by worrying-- to add days to your lifespan?”

When we look at our credit card statements, our check books, and our personal calendars, that’s when we see what is truly important to us. When we look in our closets and refrigerators and cars, that’s when we show what we really care about. When we catalogue our middle-of-the-night worries, that’s when we see what gets under our skin. In this passage Jesus is partly reassuring us—“You don’t *need* to worry about these things”—and partly chiding us “You are giving your heart and your soul, your God-given time on this earth, to things that are not worthy.”

He is drawing our attention to a chief concern of all scripture—idolatry, the worship of idols. We don’t bow down before little statues representing gods with names like Astarte and Marduk, but, oh, how certain brand names thrill us, how certain celebrities excite us, and how our failure to live up to goals dictated by our culture can frustrate and dismay us. In this sense we do bow to false gods.

Why must we avoid idolatry? Because false gods will destroy us. I’ve quoted Alan Jones to you before: “We all long to yield, to give ourselves to something greater than we are. In the end, to yield to anything less than God is a form of suicide.” * The Money-god will eat us up; we can never have enough. The gods of beauty and immortality will suck us dry because we can never reach their ideals. To give ourselves to anything less than the true God is self-destruction.

At the beginning of the Ten Commandments, God explains *why* we are to follow them. “I am the Lord your God. I brought you out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me.” We can read this to mean, “I helped you get out of slavery in Egypt and so you owe me.” But we do better to read it, “I am the means to your freedom. I am the one who wants you to be free, creative, and full of life and joy. Follow my ways and you will be all you are meant to be.” We follow the Ten Commandments and God’s other instructions because they free us. Unlike the little harping voices of culture, they don’t suck up all our money and time, leaving us still empty, still lacking, still wondering if we’ll ever be good enough.

“Consider the lilies of the field,” says Jesus. “Look at the wildflowers, bright and beautiful, blooming wherever they are.” We are to be more like them, living in faith and joy, taking each day as it comes, not trying to be something we’re not, but basking in our blessed identity before God. Of course we must work and plan; in a real life we must deal with money and food and clothes and all the rest. But Jesus reminds us to take an occasional long look at our lives and who’s in charge, and to remember that the way to a full life is to remember that it is only the God whom we should love wholeheartedly, single-mindedly, and tenaciously.

*Alan Jones, *Journey Into Christ*