

8 Epiphany – Year A – February 27, 2011
Isaiah 49:8-16a; Psalm 131; 1 Corinthians 4:1-5; Matthew 6:24-34
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When the second wave of the *Star Wars* movies were released several years ago, we learned how Luke Skywalker's father, Anakin, is seduced to the dark side and becomes Darth Vader. One of the advertising posters shows the innocent looking Anakin as a child. The picture has a huge shadow of Darth Vader behind the innocent child. It reflects the future of one transformed by poor choices. One who chooses to serve the evil Emperor as his Lord and master. I wonder if we had a picture of Jesus, what His shadow would reveal. Would it be the unimaginable shape of the glory of God, or would it be a simple cross? As children of Light, living in a world where many still walk in darkness, we might ponder on the shape of our own shadows. Do they reflect who we are today, who we will become in Christ, or Whom we serve?

Today's Gospel reading helps us to focus on what is truly important in life, so that we might leave a silhouette of Christ's love behind us. Matthew's account of Jesus' teaching offers us God's viewpoint on the human tendency to worry, and the earthly matter of wealth. The hardest thing we're probably going to do today is to take this part of Jesus' teaching seriously. It's so much easier for us to push this lesson aside or skip over it as naïve advice or an impossible ideal, spoken centuries ago when life was very different. In other words, surrounded by a plethora of wealth we don't want to hear words that tell us that there's something very wrong about our relationship to money, and all kinds of wealth. In fact, many of us won't even admit that we **are** wealthy. We'll protest and try all kinds of things to define wealth in a way that deflects attention from ourselves and how we manage our own riches. We'll even look around and make private judgments about others to point out how little we have. Of course, it's all relative, but comes down to two major challenges in our lives. The first is to get a right perspective on when enough is enough. The second is to recognize the difference between ownership and stewardship.

Whatever our income level is, our lifestyle will quickly adapt and expand into that income. With easy access to credit cards, we're even willing to exceed our income by borrowing, in order to feed our need for instant gratification. We want what we want. We want it now. And the credit card companies are all too happy to tell us in a loud voice that we can have it all. In our rush of excitement, we don't always hear the quiet whisper of debt creeping up on us, and climbing onto our backs. Many of us have grown up with a deeply embedded message that we must have all the toys, in order to keep up with our neighbors. Perhaps the worst lie we ever hear or believe is that having more, bigger, better and new means that we can prove to the world that we're somebody worthy of respect and love, and that we are, therefore, powerful and in control.

Here's the real Good News from God's perspective. We are already God's beloved children, of infinite worth and value in God's sight. A healthy foundation for our new perspective today is to understand that we already have all God's love, dignity and respect. We are all worthy, because we are made in the image of God. No one can earn anything for him or herself, or buy anything in the world that can fill this sense of longing for divine love. Our creator and redeemer has given us all a desire to seek Him, and only God can fill this need in our lives. We get into trouble when we seek divine love in all the wrong places, especially when we try to build relationships with false idols, and with other people. Foolishly, we believe that stuff or other people can give us a sense of worth or give us the kind of love that only God can provide.

When it comes to money, most of us will say that we don't have enough, and we could always use more. Being satisfied with what we have has become increasingly difficult for most of us. The consumerist worldview has us on a treadmill, one that's really hard to get off. Jesus' advice to put God first will help us to get perspective on when enough is enough. If we discover that our deepest satisfaction is found in

relationship with God in Christ Jesus, then we are much less likely to be out looking for love in all the wrong places or trying to fill that God shaped hole with stuff. Being grounded in God, we can start to see the world through God's eyes, and to see those who really *are* poor in a whole new light. We can begin the hard work of reorganizing our priorities to worry less about acquiring more possessions, and more about how to share what we already have with those who have so little. We might even begin to see what the real cost of our stuff is to the poorest in the world, in terms that matter to God. That is with a view to justice and equality, to love and compassion. Do we really want or need another piece of jewelry, if it means that a fellow human being, another beloved child of God, will be exploited or killed in the process? Is our life enriched so much by this or that trinket that we're willing to support gross violations of human rights to get what we want at the right price? With God's help, we can each discern when enough is really enough. With God's help, we can step away from the treadmill of consumerism, and show the world that God's love is not contingent on our bank accounts, or on how many toys we own.

The heart of the problem lies in the question of ownership. This is the second challenge we have to come to terms with in order to get money and worry into perspective. As followers of Jesus Christ, to Whom do we belong? ... Absolutely! We belong to God. As Creator of the universe, God has appointed humanity to be stewards of His creation, stewards of all the resources of the world, all people, all wildlife, and our environment. A steward is not the owner, but one put in charge to manage the resources of another, with thoughtfulness and careful intent. We are ultimately accountable to God for how we manage God's resources placed in our care. Feelings of ownership only incite us to value self-reliance, and self-preservation. That means that our lives become focused on assuring the acquisition and preservation of wealth so that we can remain independent. On the other hand, acknowledging that we are stewards of God's gifts means that we are free to love God, serve God, and use God's resources to help others. As stewards, we are free to live life to the fullest, loving our neighbors as ourselves. Accepting our mission as God's stewards begins when we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. In order to know what the boss wants us to do and how God wants us to share His wealth, we must pray to discern God's will. Our worship focuses and strengthens us to do God's will. Putting our faith in action means that we practice good stewardship that is life giving, and in which the grace of God holds a significant place.

We can let the world shape our lives, and strip us of God's graciousness, or we can be intentional about shaping the world to reflect God's love, abundance and generosity. Jesus tells us not to worry about anything else. Despite that great piece of advice, we have a hard time setting aside our anxious thoughts. Yet when we live as good stewards of God's creation, we are less likely to live beyond our means, which is one sure way to a world of worry, and much more likely to live in a way that reflects God's characteristics. In the fantasy world of the *Star Wars* saga, despite his poor choices, Darth Vader experiences redemption and turns against the evil Emperor to protect the life of his son. Vader leaves many dark shadows, blots of evil across the galaxy, yet finally accepts who he really is, and returns to the light. An old Swedish proverb says, "Worry often gives a small thing a big shadow". As children of the Light, we can let God take care of the shadows of our past, and even those that may or may not be a part of our future. You and I must live in the present, making each moment count. When we seek God first, we experience real life and freedom in Christ Jesus our Lord. When we live in the Light, overshadowed only by our Almighty God, then we can trust the Lord who makes "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). As Martin Luther once said, "Pray, and let God worry."

Amen.