

Lately, I’ve been spending time watching the news and commentary on CNN, regarding what’s going on in Libya. We see this story unfolding like an historical drama right before our eyes. News analysts team up to comment on all that’s happening, keeping their report factual, and for the most part, expressing little emotion. However, the truth is that we don’t know what the final outcome of all this unrest will be, as we see Libyans and foreigners alike trying to escape the country. Should we be anxious?

Closer to home, our State Governor has proposed cutting costs by making certain public employees pay more for their benefits and limiting their collective bargaining rights. This has become a major concern for many people. Should they be anxious?

And even closer to home, the Marshfield City Council has been dealing with a complaint regarding having prayer at the Council meetings. Since I’m the person who is presently scheduling area clergy to pray at these meetings, I was asked to meet with some of the City Hall staff to share with them how I do the scheduling. Should I be anxious?

Today’s Gospel lesson from Matthew 6 contains two related themes: Who are you serving? And: Why be anxious? These two themes are related because both of them are inviting us to figure out who or what is the focal point in our life.

The Scripture begins with **“No one can serve two masters.”** Going back to the original language of this text, a clearer translation would be: **“No one can be a slave to two owners.”** For if you were, you couldn’t be fully devoted to either one. You may even end up flip flopping between the two, loving one more at times, and then loving the other more at times. **“You need to make a choice as to who or what you will serve,”** Jesus says, because **“You can’t serve God and wealth.”** Now another word used for “wealth” is *“mamon”* --a Hebrew word meaning material possessions. The rabbis invited people of that day to “let the *mamon* of their neighbor be as dear to them as their own” --to respect their neighbor’s possessions and their own, equally. The root word for *mamon* means *to entrust*. *Mamon* was the wealth that a person entrusted to someone such as a banker, for safekeeping. But over time, the word *mamon* came to mean, not *that which is entrusted to someone*, but *that in which a person puts their trust*. In the end *mamon* came to be spelled with a capital M, and came to be seen as a god in which people put their trust. And then the question became: “Is it our possessions, or our Lord, that we serve?”

Then Jesus begins a longer conversation on the topic of anxiety. We probably have all experienced this feeling. Perhaps there is something in your life right now that is making you feel anxious. Anxiety has to do with feelings of distress over something that has happened, or uneasiness over something that we think may happen in the future. What do we do with these feelings?

In our Scripture, Jesus begins by saying: **“Don’t be anxious. Don’t let your life be controlled by fear and worry, which can wear you down and take all the joy out of your life.”** Then Jesus lists some of the things about which we could be anxious: food, drink, clothing, or the length of our life--things having to do with our physical existence on earth. But very quickly, Jesus directs our attention to the world of nature--the birds and the lilies. Neither of them is involved in anxious toil or stockpiling, yet our Heavenly Father cares for the birds and enables the lilies to display inexpressible beauty. And if God has done these things in the world of nature, won’t he do so much more for you and me, as the crown of his creation? “So don’t worry about food or drink, or clothing,” Jesus said, “For even those who don’t know me yet, the Gentiles, are looking for these

things. But you who are fellow-Jews already know the generosity of the Heavenly Father because you know me. And the Heavenly Father himself already knows every need you have.” “So,” Jesus said, “instead of getting anxious about what may happen tomorrow, give your attention to God’s Kingdom, that is, to what God is doing today: his love for you today, his call on your life today, and what he is providing you today. For God will help you deal with whatever challenges may come up when the time comes.”

It’s true that there are many things in this life--people, places and events--that could cause us to feel anxious. Maybe there’s a boss, family member, or a store clerk, with whom we feel uncomfortable, because we’re never quite sure how they will act toward us. Perhaps we get anxious thinking about being in a crowd, or in the dentist’s chair, or driving the freeway. Maybe we would find ourselves anxious if we had to speak in public, if we went to visit a family member who is seriously ill, or if had to do something in a tough situation that no one except us could do.

How can we handle these situations? Again, it’s about remembering to focus on our God and who he is. In John 16:33 we hear these words of Jesus: **“In the world you will have trouble, (you have things that could make you anxious) but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”** And this is how we can overcome:

\*1. Remember that if God gave us the gift of life and his saving grace, surely God will provide the other things necessary to support the life he’s given us. Anxiety may be a sign that we are having difficulty trusting God. But if we remember that God loves us and seeks our welfare, it will strengthen our ability to trust him for these things.

\*2. Look back over your life and see how God has brought you forward to this day. If we had known ahead of time the kinds of challenges we would be faced with in our lives, we might have thought it impossible to get through them. But God has brought us through them and we are here today.

\*3. Spend regular time in prayer and Scripture reading. The days I spent away on spiritual retreat always gave me a noticeable gift of peace, so that when I returned to my regular schedule, I had a reserve of inner peace with which to meet daily challenges.

\*4. Live one day at a time, because that is how God provides for us—one day at a time. Live each day as it comes and engage each task as it appears without worrying, for in doing this you will find peace and power for living.

\*5. Finally, keep the even-bigger picture in mind. God has the whole universe in his hands, and yet he is mindful of each one of us as we hear in his words to us in Is. 49: **“Even if a mother should forget her child, I will never forget you... (for) I have written your name on the palms of my hands.”** Amen.