

TWO THINGS AT THE SAME TIME

--It was one of those “someone’s in Geisinger Hospital” weeks, and so I was on my way to Danville to pay my respects to one of our own.

As I made my way east on Route 80 in the right lane, in my mirrors I noticed a car coming up from the rear in the passing lane. I may have been driving five miles over the speed limit, but this car was coming up on me considerably faster than that. I expected momentarily to be overtaken in a whoosh, as the driver hurriedly raced on to his or her destination.

Instead, something very different occurred. Just as that car got almost even with me, still in the passing lane, it slowed down to match my speed and sort of shadowed me for a quarter of a mile.

Curious about how to account for the unexpected development, I took a quick look to the left to get some sense of what was happening in that vehicle. It was then that I noticed that the driver was a young woman.

Just as I was beginning to think that she had slowed down to check me out (after all, as you know, I am quite the hunk), I saw her raise her right hand and begin to pick at the keyboard on her cell phone. She was driving and texting, apparently using my car in the right lane to keep her car positioned more or less in the left one.

--For me, it was a scary moment, and one which underscored the truth of the lines from the Gospels which you heard read this morning, where Matthew and Luke parallel each other in their common opinion that you cannot successfully be dedicated to two things at the same time.

“No one can serve two masters” is how the evangelists put it. “[The servant] will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.”

They very astutely have their finger on an important psychological fact. That fact is that, given the development of the human brain to this point in our evolution, we never have capacity to attend completely to more than one thing at a given moment. There is no such thing, then, as “multi-tasking,” if by that we are suggesting that we can accomplish two things simultaneously.

In truth, what passes for multi-tasking is but the rapid, repeated shuttling of our attention from one task to the other and then back again. At least for now, there simply is no human ability for doing “a” and “b” at the same time. We do “a,” then quickly jump to doing “b” while briefly ignoring “a,” then promptly jump back to doing a bit more of “a” while paying no mind to “b,” before returning to “b” once more, and so on.

In short, there may be the appearance of being capable of driving a speeding vehicle while at the same time texting out a message, but inevitably either the driving or the texting (or both) will suffer from the divided attention. Quite simply, that is because the human mind is incapable of serving two competing masters, incapable of productively applying itself to two distinctly different ends at the same time. We are either singularly focused on the one and, in fact, indifferent towards the other; or we ignore the one in the interest of affording focus to the other.

We can never have it both ways at the same time. So, no matter how it may appear to be, when our attention is caught within a pair of possibilities, always we will be moving in the direction of one and therefore away from the other. It is not only a spiritual principle, but a psychological fact: It is an utter impossibility to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to a particular direction while, out of the corner of our eye, we have energy engaged

in another direction.

-- Our two evangelists are primarily concerned about the consuming pursuit of financial gains and riches, at the expense of birthing the things of the kingdom of God. If the point to one's life, they are warning, is the amassing of great personal fortune, then pretending to be a conscientious servant of God is utterly point-less. As they succinctly put it, "You cannot serve God and wealth." You are probably familiar with the older versions, which read "You cannot serve God and *mammon*," which is the Greek word for wealth.

The accuracy of their insight, however, is not restricted just to the pursuit of money. The fact is that we cannot simultaneously serve God and anything else. In practical terms, whatever we are fixed on at a particular moment is our "master" at that moment--it is what we're attending to, listening to, obedient to. What Matthew and Luke suggest is just as true if our attention, time, energy, and personal resources are dedicated, instead of to the things of God, to the chase after safety, or security, or prestige, or power, or one of a hundred other things.

If we grasp this basic idea, then we find that it cuts in a particular way for us, sitting here in this place, during this interim period. And it demands that we become honest with ourselves--before the next Settled Pastor is called and arrives, his/her having been assured that we are serious about growing St. John's, and his/her expecting that we are serious about St. John's flexing its considerable muscles in the effort of making a difference in the world, a difference that it is wholly capable of making.

It's true, then, for us in particular. We cannot authentically serve the interests of God while actually being devoted and obligated to something else, as evident by our behaviors. We cannot serve God and our comfort, or our ease, or our convenience. Either we are committed to this endeavor to bring about a revived and flourishing St. John's, or we are not.

If we are, as judged by our behavior--mouths deceive, behavior does not--then we shall succeed in putting ourselves back on the map. If truly, tangibly caring about St. John's future is the "master" whom we serve, it cannot be otherwise.

And if, as judged by our behavior, we are not genuinely part of that endeavor, then, despite the grandest of visions and the bravest of talk, we shall fumble and stumble along, vainly trying to find our way under a God whom we do not really serve. If the "master" to whom we are dedicated is other than truly, tangibly caring about St. John's future, it cannot be otherwise.

--I grant you: Surely, all this would have been easier this morning if the young woman in that next car on Route 80 had been checking me out. I would have had some explaining to do to Hue, of course, but we wouldn't have had to deal with such difficult matters.

As it is, however, we must ask ourselves: All pretense aside, as judged by our behavior, which way are we committed to here?

It is not possible to serve two masters.

In truth, which do we serve?