

Sermon: "A Word for Anxious People"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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AN ANXIOUS DAY

I was late to work one day this week. Already a bit anxious I made my way up Pleasant Hill Road. As I stopped at the intersection and waited for the traffic to clear, an impatient motorist sped by on the shoulder.

Thinking that he was not quite awake, I laid on my horn to help him focus.
My anxiety increased.

When I reached the office, I found that the alarm had gone off and the police had been called. Can those folks at Brinks never learn? We don't want the police called during the day. We can't afford the "false alarm" charge levied by our police department. More anxiety.

Finally, I settled my nerves with a cup of coffee, and began to look at the Scripture lessons for this week. About that time I realized that we had forgotten to lock the door and one of the street people had made his way into my office. He was not happy with something that I had done and was there to "have it out with me."

You'll be happy to know that I did not say what I thought at that point, but I did manage to show my friend the door. At this point, I wondered if it might be a good idea to go home and start over. But, I sat down at my desk once more and, after answering three or four calls that were meant for the First Presbyterian Church of Orlando with trembling hands I opened the Bible to our lesson for today.

My eyes fell on verse 6,
"Do not be anxious about anything"
Right. That's easy for you to say Paul.
You haven't been through what I've been through this morning!

PAUL AND ANXIETY

And then I remembered. Actually, that's not true. As we discussed in last week's sermon, Paul had been through much worse than what I had been through that day. He had been persecuted for the faith. He was in jail. And his very life was on the line for the gospel.

Even the traffic on I-4 doesn't produce the kind of anxiety that Paul faced.
And yet, Paul seemed to have the ability to ride above the threats and the circumstances of his life. Paul said in the very beginning of his letter,
"For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." (Philippians 1:21)

In the verses that follow our lesson for today, Paul said that he had learned to be content with what he had whether it was a lot or a little. Paul could give thanks in all circumstances because he believed the grace of God in Jesus Christ would seem him through. (Philippians 4:12-13)

Paul was not an anxious person. For him a lack of anxiety was a matter of faith. Circumstances, reasoned Paul, should not control his life. His life should be controlled by the power and promises of God in Jesus Christ.

DON'T WORRY

And, Paul encouraged the church at Philippi to follow his example. He told them, "Don't be anxious about anything. Don't worry. Stand firm in the Lord!" (cf. Philippians 4:1,6)

I talked with someone about this passage a few weeks ago, and he said, "This passage teaches us that worry is a sin. If I worry about something, if I'm anxious, I'm being disobedient to God."

I didn't say anything, but I thought to myself, "Oh sure. Let's add guilt to our anxiety. That'll make things better!"

My friend meant well, but the cure for anxiety is a bit more complex than resolving to "just say no." But this passage does give us some specific ways that we can effectively cope with the anxiety that inevitably comes our way.

OF THE SAME MIND IN THE LORD

First, Paul told the Philippians that personal problems with other Christians need to be worked out. In verse two of our lesson, Paul talked about two women who were leaders in the church and yet were having a problem with each other. He wrote, "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." Philippians 4:2

We don't know why Euodia and Syntyche's were at odds with each other. But, I would be willing to guess that their fight could have been prompted by their anxiety about some problem that faced the church. They had differing opinions about how to deal with that problem and therein lay the bone of contention.

There's a myth that "real Christians" don't fight or disagree. But, it has been my experience that often some of the hardest workers in the church have very big disagreements, even fights because they are so passionate about their faith, and they're trying to work out some anxiety producing problem together.

In fact, we learn in the book of Acts that even the apostle Paul had a tremendous argument with his long time friend and fellow missionary, Barnabas. It seems that a young colleague by the name of John Mark abandoned the group in the middle of one of their missionary journeys. Paul thought that this disqualified John Mark from any future journeys. But, Barnabas disagreed. He felt they should give the young man another chance.

So, Paul and Barnabas, two close friends who risked all for the gospel, had an angry dispute. In fact, Paul and Barnabas became so angry that they parted company and went in different directions. Barnabas took young John Mark with him to Cyprus, and Paul took Silas with him to Syria and Cilicia. (Acts 15:37-39)

If something like this could happen to two of the greatest Christian missionaries who ever lived, how can we think that conflict and the anxiety it breeds will magically be eliminated in our churches today?

People who have strong beliefs will often have strong arguments as well. The key is how we deal with those arguments.

I wonder if this dispute might have been on Paul's mind as he implored these two women to "be of the same mind in the Lord." That last phrase, "be of the same mind in the Lord" is the key. I believe the apostle was asking these women to try and put what they thought was right on the back burner as they sought God's will together. And that's the key for us as well.

Much of our anxiety comes from being focused only on what we think is right and good. And when we don't get what we want, we become upset. Somehow we need to remember what we say in the Lord's Prayer, "thy will be done, thy kingdom come." Saying that is easy. Doing it ... being willing to wait for God's leading in real life situations is not so easy.

But, it can be done. And Paul's letter gives us some practical suggestions to use in situations like this. He asks the other members of the congregation to help these women in their disagreement.

Helping is not whispering to anyone who will listen, "Did you know that Euodia and Synthyche and not speaking to each other?" Indeed, since this was a letter written to the entire church at Philippi, the conflict between these two is placed out in the open and in a larger context the context of working for God's kingdom. In that context, the mind of Christ becomes much more important than the personal preferences of two people.

Are any of our problems really so great that we can't work them out for the sake of the kingdom? I think not. Even those problems that may seem insurmountable.

So, the first cure for anxiety is in so far as it's possible ... to take care of problems with others in a positive way. How many problems could be solved if only we could agree to just leave them in God's hands and be willing to wait for God's solution? Almost all of them.

WORSHIP

The second cure for anxiety that I find in this passage is the cure of worship. In verses 4 and 5 of our lesson Paul writes,

[4] Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. [5] Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Philippians 4:4-5 (NRSV)

There is something about heartfelt worship which disarms an anxious and aggressive spirit. Indeed, there's a connection between being able to worship and our relationship with others. Jesus once said,

[23] So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, [24] leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Matthew 5:23-24 (NRSV)

Getting right with our neighbor makes it possible for us to worship.

And I think the converse is true as well. Worshipping God enables us to get right with our neighbor. If we focus on worshipping God, if we rejoice in the Lord ... again and again somehow the concerns of this world do not seem so important.

It's like the song, Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus. "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of this world will grow strangely dim in the light of his wonder and grace."

The conflicts and anxiety producing events of this world do not hold a candle to the wonder of God's grace.

This is an area where the folks who prefer the more modern praise and worship style of music may have it right. When I first experienced that style of worship, my reaction was negative. Too repetitive. The theology is too shallow.

But, my viewpoint has changed.

Jesus said that we should love the Lord our God with all your heart, soul and mind. (Matthew 22:37) Being a good Calvinist I got the mind part right. But, as I look back upon my life, I realize that I might have been lacking in the heart and soul department. In addition to having a mind for God's truth, we also need a heart for God's presence.

Maybe simple phrases of praise can be a way of focusing us on that most important part of worship. As Paul put it,

[4] Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Philip. 4:4 (NRSV)

So we have two ways to combat anxiety leaving our personal problems in God's hands and filling our life with the joy of worshipping God.

GENTLENESS

The third way of combating anxiety is found in verse 5 of our lesson. Paul said,

[5] Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Philip. 4:5 (NRSV)

Some of us, myself included have a problem managing our anger.

Remember when I laid on the horn when the truck pulled around me this past week? Not the right thing to do. That was not a gentle response.

More than that, it was not a response that decreased the anxiety I was feeling. It increased it!

Quite often we hear the old saying, "I don't get mad. I just get even!" But, that's not true. When we try to get even, we get mad and anxious ... and a lot of other emotions that we don't want.

We believe the Lord is near ... near in presence and perhaps near in time when He will come again. Who knows?

What we do know is that our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. God is our rock and our salvation, and therefore, we need not be overly concerned about getting even.

Instead, our trust in God enables us to be gentle with others. Actually, the word translated “gentleness” means literally “appropriate” and by implication means “gentle, patient, and with moderation.”

We quite often make ourselves anxious by responding to a problem in a way that is not appropriate. We blow the problem out of proportion. We are not patient. Our response is not measured and moderate.

The gentle person patiently takes all factors into consideration and then responds out of strength instead of weakness. If I believe the Lord is near, I do not have to constantly defend myself or worry about what will happen. I can be gentle.

PRAYER WITH THANKSGIVING

Now we're up to three ways to combat anxiety. Trust God to solve our personal problems, fill our lives with worship, respond to provocation in a gentle way and now ... what I think is the ultimate cure for anxiety ... prayer.

But, I'm not talking about just any kind of prayer. I'm talking about prayer that is focused in a certain way. How we pray and what we pray is very important. Lots of folks talk about prayer being the answer, but Paul asks the Philippians to pray a certain way in an anxious time.

In fact, if you've got a lot of anxiety in your life, it might be a good idea for you to memorize Philippians 4:6-7.

I know. People don't memorize Scripture these days. But, perhaps they should. Especially these verses.

You see, if you can put these verses in your mind, they can be with all through the day when anxious situations occur, and you can actually put them into practice.

Let's read them again. Paul wrote,

[6] Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

[7] And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philip. 4:6-7 (NIV)

There are two parts to this prayer. First, you petition God, that is you present your requests to God. And second, you present those requests with thanksgiving. That second part is the one we most often leave out, but it is very important if we are to overcome anxiety.

THANKSGIVING SERVICE

Some of our church members from Trinidad and Tobago have an interesting worship service every year in their homes. It's a thanksgiving service, and they invite all their friends to their home to eat a meal and give thanks for the blessings of the past year. Usually it is held in late September or October. And, being a ceremony that originated out of India's culture, there are always people there who belong to another faith usually Muslim and Hindu.

Two years ago the service was held right after the events of September 11. Though it was a thanksgiving service, it was hard to give thanks under those circumstances. Indeed, I wondered out loud if some of those present might be the victims of prejudice because of their faith and offered my support in that regard.

But, we gave thanks and had a meal. It seemed to help.

This year I held another service, and I used as my text Philippians 4:6-7. I reminded everyone of what was going on last year at this time of the uncertainty we all felt, the fears about war and what would happen next.

And I said that we still have many things to be anxious about a plunging stock market, the threat of war with Iraq and so on.

But, then I also said,

“But, despite all that, we have a great many things about which we can be thankful. We did make it through the year without any more major problems. Despite an economic down turn and corporate scandal, we continue to have a strong economy and a strong country. God has blessed us in this last year, and we have many reasons to give thanks.”

We again gave thanks and had a meal together. It was once again a great blessing.

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

What I talked about on a national level is also true on a personal level as well. You may have had setbacks in the past year, but in what ways has God answered your prayers? What blessings do you have in your life right now? For whom and for what do you give thanks?

This might be a good way to think about praying.

For every petition, for every thing that you ask from God, try to find something else for which you can give thanks. It's like that old song that we sing at Thanksgiving sometimes, “Count Your Blessings.”

I know of no better cure for anxiety than to count your blessings, to appreciate and give thanks to God for all the good things in your life.

Paul puts it another way in verse 8 our lesson for today. He wrote,

[8] Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things. Philip. 4:8 (NIV)

In other words, focus upon the positive.

Fill your mind with thoughts of God's blessings and the good things and good people that God has brought into your world.

A while back somebody said, “You are what you eat.”

In other words, what we become physically is related to our diet.

That's true spiritually as well. We are what we think.

We need to be very careful about our self talk because quite often negative self talk can lead to poor mental and spiritual health.

Friends, I know that all of our lives are filled with anxiety about many things. All of us here today have very real problems with which we must deal.

But, let us encourage one another to give thanks for the good things in our lives.

Let us help one another count our blessings as well as asking God for help.

When we do that, I believe the words of the apostle Paul will be true for us as well, the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard our hearts and our lives in Christ Jesus. And that is a welcome word for an anxious people.

Amen. [.. \](#)