

ANXIETY: THE GOOD-FOR-NOTHING

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” *Matthew 6:25*

Anxiety! It is the thief of well-being, of time, and of richness in our relationships. Anxiety gives birth to no good thing, produces nothing palatable. As Winston Churchill put it after the tragedy of Gallipoli in World War I, “The terrible ifs accumulate” in the anxious mind. Anxiety is, in short, unproductive, stifling—a *good-for-nothing*.

Anxiety throttles action. The very word comes from the Old English word, *wyrgan*, meaning to strangle. As I worked on this message, Betsy Friend shared with me an insight from psychotherapy, that anxiety and depression are two faces of the same condition. For depression frequently renders one lifeless; a feeling of deadness, as anyone who has gone through it understands.

Of course there are anxieties that are rooted in complex psychoses or metabolic disorders, but that's not the source of most of our anxiety. It resides in the clenched hands of a need to control, what we *imagine* is about to happen. But as Thomas Carlyle once wisely cautioned, “Our main business is not to see what lies simply at a distance, but to do what lies clearly at hand.” If you are an anxious person, I encourage you to discipline yourself to write down in a journal your specific anxieties and date them. Then, after some time, check off which ones came true. I predict it will be a very short list.

Anxiety fixates on the future. It is so often born of a negative use of imagination. Jesus, however, teaches us to use our imagination productively, and gives us tools that focus our minds on the present, like cultivating a spirit of joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self control, against which, wrote Paul, “there is no commandment.”

It's hardly accidental, then, that the Bible opens and closes with God's everlasting commitment to be creatively life giving. Take the first creation story in Genesis 1, for instance, whose shape is beautifully proportioned to show God's providential care. Each of the first three days picture the three environments for life and wellbeing: the vast celestial space, the domains of air and sea, and finally the land mass. Then, in order, day's four, five and six populate those spaces, with sun, moon and stars, aerial and sea creatures, and finally animals and humankind. Or take it's counterpoint, the closing chapters of the Bible in Revelation, which paints the stunning image of a new heaven and new earth that descends to inhabit this one. In between lie the prophets of God and the ministry of Jesus, whose writings and teachings always finish on high notes of creativity, bringing light out of personal darkness, life out of death, hope out of cynicism, joy and celebration out of sorrow (even for poor Job). The opening words of the Bible, often translated, “In the beginning God *created* the heavens and the earth,” imply creation as passing moments of creativity, but are better rendered in the Hebrew, “In the beginning, when God *began* to create,” which reminds us, as spring will soon confirm, that all of God's creation is ongoing and renewing. Or at least it is so intended, when we find the universal will to match it in spirit and companionship.

Overcoming anxiety is all about trust. “Do not be anxious about your life,” said Jesus, “what you will eat, or what you will drink, or what you will wear.” And then he compares us in our anxiety to the birds of the air, whom God daily provides for. Like many of you we have a bird feeder by a garden window. And I got to wondering how birds, with such thread-like legs, manage to stand and especially sleep on so perilous a perch (sort of like parishioners in the pew). So, I did a bit of research, and it turns out that many

birds have a muscle in their leg that automatically tightens when they land on a branch, and relaxes only when the bird commits to fly. The bird sleeps knowing implicitly that it can trust the muscle to tighten, even when the rest of its body is relaxed in sleep. Isn't that a lovely image of trust, even in a sometimes howling wind.

Overcoming anxiety is all about trust. It's not something immediate, but something learned by—well, trusting, and finding one's confidence confirmed. When I meet with couples in pre-marital counseling, I commonly ask them at some point, "What keeps you and binds you together as a couple?" Invariably they answer that it is their love for each other. But when I ask if they could love each other if they did not trust each other, they answer that they could not. It's a nice notion that love makes the world go round, but love is sustained by trust, and being confirmed in our trusting. Paul wrote of trust,

"The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." *Philippians 4:6-7*

I *know* this to be true!

For the great majority of us, dealing with anxiety is about two things. First, determining how much to heart (and faith) we take Jesus' wise counsel that, if we "strive first for the kingdom of God and its righteousness . . . all these things will be given to you as well" (*Matthew 6:33*). That's Jesus gift to us. The second is that we have to do our part by claiming and working at having a state of mind that manifests or lives such trust. Here's an example, written by a worker in a nursing home.

The 92-year-old, petite, well-poised and proud lady, moved to the nursing home today. She is fully dressed each morning by eight o'clock, with her hair fashionably coifed and makeup perfectly applied, even though she is legally blind, Her husband of 70 years recently passed away, making the move necessary. After many hours of waiting patiently in the lobby of the nursing home, she smiled sweetly when told her room was ready. As she maneuvered her walker to the elevator, I provided a visual description of her tiny room, sheets that had been hung on her window. "I love it," she stated with the enthusiasm of an eight-year-old having just been presented with a new puppy. "Mrs. Jones, you haven't seen the room just wait." "That doesn't have anything to do with it," she replied. "Happiness is something you decide on ahead of time. Whether I like my room or not doesn't depend on how the furniture is arranged ... it's how I arrange my mind." "I already decided to love it ...It's a decision I make every morning when I wake up. I have a choice; I can spend the day in bed recounting the difficulty I have with the parts of my body that no longer work, or get out of bed and be thankful for the ones that do. Each day is a gift, and as long as my eyes open I'll focus on the new day and all the happy memories I've stored away ... just for this time in my life." Old age is like a bank account ... you withdraw from what you've put in .. So, my advice to you would be to deposit a lot of happiness in the bank account of memories Thank you for your part in filling my Memory bank. I am still depositing. Remember the five simple rules to be happy:

This exceptional, yet strikingly normal elderly lady would , over time, tell of her five rules for life, which fit perfectly with the teachings of Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, from which our gospel lesson comes. They are these:

1. Free your heart from hatred.
2. Free your mind from anxiety.
3. Live simply.
4. Give more.
5. Expect less.

To God be the glory. Amen.