

OPENING TO THE SOFT SPOT - 2 THE CHRISTIAN ANTIDOTE TO WORRY

(07/31/16)

Scripture Lessons: Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 12:22-34

*“Anxiety weighs down the human heart,
but a good word cheers it up.” (Proverbs 12:25)*

How many of you here this morning have a tendency to worry about things? Please put your hand up. Wow! It seems like worry is a fairly common life experience—at least here in Southborough. I am concerned about those of you who did not raise your hand. Do you not get it? Do you not read the newspapers or listen to the news?

Back in the 1950’s Rollo May characterized the middle of the last century as “the age of anxiety.” I suspect that anxiety is even more characteristic of our time. Following up on last week’s theme, this morning we are going to look at the phenomenon of worry from the perspective of armor. We are going to consider an alternative way of dealing with our worries: not by defeating them but by dissolving them through prayer.

The apostle Paul encourages us to put on “the whole armor of God” in preparation for our battle with the demonic spirits that seek to control us. However, the idea of putting on a suit of armor and taking up weapons has its limitations. The armor that would keep us safe, keep us from experiencing pain, keep us from being wounded by life may cut us off from life and from other people, even those whom we love.

Last week we began to consider how we could begin to remove the armor, the system of defenses that we have constructed since early childhood, that set of defenses that functions as an impassable wall, a deep moat, an impenetrable boundary between us and other people, between us and life, and even between us and God. We contrasted the martial approach to life with the approach that Jesus teaches in his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus calls us to take the risk of vulnerability. He calls us to enter into even those life experiences that are painful that we might transform suffering, even death into new life.

Let’s think about worry. Worry and anxiety are quite similar. When we worry, we can usually identify that about which we are worried, while the root cause of anxiety may or may not be identifiable. A person with Generalized Anxiety Disorder is anxious pretty much all of the time. Freud called this kind of anxiety “free-floating anxiety.”

Panic attacks, the abrupt onset of intense somatic symptoms, do not usually have an identifiable trigger. On the other hand, I have heard people describe themselves as a “worry wart,” meaning that they worry more than they would like. I’m not sure what a “worry wart” is, but if you are one, you know what I mean.

We commonly think of anxiety as an affliction, as something that happens to us, as something that invades our consciousness. I think that anxiety arises from our need for power and control. It is an indication that the armor we constructed to keep us safe is not adequate to contain the real or imagined threat. We feel vulnerable and we don’t like it. We want more power; more control over something or someone.

Some of you here this morning might be worried about climate change, about terrorist attacks, about the upcoming national election, about your health, about your loved ones’ health, about old age, about death. You may be worried about the stock market. A few of you are probably worried about whether the pitching staff of the Boston Red Sox, particularly their relief corps, is strong enough to go all the way.

Let’s look at an example of worry and the problem with our traditional ways of addressing it. Let’s assume that as I stepped into the pulpit this morning I experienced anxiety. My hands got sweaty and my mouth got dry. Let’s assume that I stayed awake most of last night worrying about how this morning’s sermon would be received.

What is at the root of this anxiety? I don’t have to be a rocket surgeon to realize that I have a vested interest in what you think of me. I want you to like me. I want you to think that I am intelligent and that I know a lot about religion. I want you to think that I am interesting, engaging, and a good preacher. Since I have low self-esteem, if you think well of me and my sermon, I will think well of myself. If you don’t think highly of me and of my sermon, my self-esteem will suffer a wound, and I will become depressed.

I would like to control the way you see me, your judgment of me as a preacher. However, I have no way of controlling this. You may like my psychologically based reflections, or you may not. You may like the parallels I draw between Christian spirituality and other spiritual traditions, or you may not. When I am confronted with a situation where I would like to control something that I cannot control, I become anxious.

If we extrapolate this example to our own sources of worry we will see that the basic dynamics are the same. When I worry about something, it seems that I would like

to control it—but I can't. When I am feeling anxious about something, it seems that I would like to have it go the way I would like—but I can't be sure that it will. Anxiety is an indication that we are building our life around the quest for power—and it isn't working. We find ourselves face-to-face with a personal, relational, national, or world situation that we experience as threatening.

When the primitive part of our brain, that part that calls us to fight or flight is activated, we want to do battle or flee. However, in many of life's situations, especially when we are confronted by the existential concerns of life, we can do neither. And so we hunker down behind our armor and obsess about the situation. This obsession may actually be a misguided way of doing battle. We may believe that if we can only think this problem through, we might be able to solve it. And so we go over and over it in our mind, but our anxiety does not lessen. Our anxiety actually becomes more of an enemy than that which we originally feared. It can make us miserable.

Jesus asks whether by worrying we can add a single hour to our span of life. Not only can't we add any time to our lifespan, chronic anxiety has been shown to shorten it. But I'm not concerned about the length of our life. I am more concerned with the quality of our life, the quality of the very few days that are entrusted to us.

If our armor functions to protect us from life, prayer leads us forward into life from a position of vulnerability. There are three functions of prayer. First, prayer, if it is true prayer and not an expression of egocentric wishes, can serve to bring us back to our center. Second, it can function in the service of healing. And third, it can be an expression of trust, an act of surrender to God's will.

In the case of my performance anxiety, if I raise it up in prayer I may realize that I have been pulled off center. I have become ego-centric rather than Christo-centric. I should not be concerned with whether you think highly of me, whether you like me; I should be focused on leading you in your worship, helping you to deepen your relationship with God, helping you to experience the kingdom of heaven within. If I let Jesus help me to keep a proper focus in my preaching, the anxiety simply dissolves.

To use another example, I may find myself worried about a loved one who is sick. I obviously care about the person and his/her health. My care, my concern is an expression of love. However, my worry not only does nothing positive for the person, it

actually pulls me off center. My worry is an indication that I would like to determine the outcome of his/her affliction, but I do not have the power to do this.

Prayer, on the other hand, is a way of channeling our love, our concern in the service of healing. When we pray for a person, we dissolve the boundary and collapse the distance between us. Our prayer strengthens the God-given healing power that is already active within the person. And our prayer makes a difference. It may not be enough to heal the person of his/her illness, but it does make a difference.

James 5:13-15 tells us, “The prayer of faith will save the sick. . . Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” Prayer is a much more effective way of expressing our concern than worrying.

Finally, we may be worried about the upcoming election. Our worry doesn’t help the situation. We know that when we find ourselves fearful and angry, we are simply adding our fear and anger to the fear and anger that is already present in so many people. When I worry about the election, I am saying that I want the results to turn out the way I want. I would like everyone to vote the same way that I do. Wait a minute! That wouldn’t be a democracy!

It would be a lot more constructive to study the platforms of at least the four major parties, examine the candidates, and then let prayer guide my choice. The only vote I can control is my own. If I can keep from getting attached to results, I will cast my vote for the candidate that I believe offers what America needs right now. Then I can go home in peace, accepting whatever the majority decision turns out to be.

I can’t control the future, but I can be a good steward of the present. I can’t control other people, but I can try to keep my own life on center. I don’t know how everything will turn out in a time of great change like ours, but I pray that the chaos will lead to something new and creative. As we read in 1 Timothy 4, “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by God’s word and by prayer.” When I feel the need to do battle, I also need to remember that everything that is outside me is also inside me. If I want to change the world, I have to begin with myself.

Rather than worry, which is not a positive emotion, let us take Paul's advice in the 4th chapter of his letter to the Colossians when he said, "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving." We should also remember what Jesus said to his disciples when they confessed that they were unable to drive a demon out of a young boy who was possessed: "This kind can come out only through prayer" (Mark 9:29)

In closing, I would like to tell you a story about the Buddhist monk Milarepa. Milarepa came back to his humble hut one day only to find that it had been taken over by demons. He tried to drive the demons out, but his words and actions were to no avail. Then he decided to be vulnerable. He decided to open his heart. He invited the demons to sit down at his kitchen table and have tea with him. The minute he did this, the demons disappeared. They just dissolved.

We have many concerns. That is as it should be. Our concern is an expression of our caring. We want to respond to life in a positive, loving, and healing way, just as Jesus did. However, the approach of power, the urge to do battle with our demons, whether inside or outside, is doomed to failure. And our armor, no matter how thick it is, will not keep us safe.

Let's try being vulnerable. If we can do this, that with which we would do battle might just touch our soft spot. When this happens, our heart will be enlightened and, even in the midst of a far from perfect world, we will find peace.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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