

LENT #3: GIVING UP OUR ANXIETY

(03/12/2023)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 12:13-34

“And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?” (Luke 12:25-26)

“Spirituality is a matter of less, not more.” (Meister Eckhart)

Today is the third Sunday in Lent and the third in our Lenten series on the theme of giving up that which holds us back from the experience of the kingdom of God. By framing our reflections as a matter of giving up, we remind ourselves that our attachments, those parts of our lives that cause suffering for ourselves and others, are consciously chosen. *Since we choose to build our lives around them, we can also choose to let them go.*

The first week we looked at our illusions. We need to give up the illusions we have about ourselves to see ourselves as God sees us. We need to give up the prejudices we have concerning people of different racial and ethnic groups, different religions, or different sexual orientations that we might discover the child of God we have been holding at arm's length. We also need to give up our illusions concerning God. We need to break apart the little theological boxes within which we have imprisoned God that we might continually rediscover God in our lives, just as the disciples rediscovered Jesus in a new form following his crucifixion.

The second week we looked at how our attachment to material possessions can hold us back from the kingdom of God. We noted that material possessions, money, even wealth is not the problem. This made us all feel better since, compared to the living standard of most of the people in the world, we would be considered wealthy. The problem is not our wealth; it is our attachment to our wealth. This is when we stopped feeling better. We stopped feeling better when we realized that it is when our grasping, our self-centeredness betrays our deepest values, or perhaps when it reveals our deepest values--our own pleasure, our own self-interest, that it becomes a sin.

This morning we will think about giving up the anxiety we experience in relation to a present or a future that we cannot control. The political polarization and the rise of extremism in our country, even in liberal Massachusetts, have given rise to significant anxiety in many people. They are afraid for the future of our country and the world. One of my counselees recently informed me that she was suffering from PSD. Since I am admittedly not a DSM-5 guru, I had no shame in confessing to her that I had never heard of this diagnosis. She informed me that PSD stands for political stress disorder! Even though it is not listed in the diagnostic manual, I find that many of my counselees and parishioners are suffering from this syndrome!

Anxiety is always about the future. It is a psychological and somatic response to a future that we would like to control but find we cannot control. The only way that I know to defeat, set aside, give up, *or see through* our anxiety is to be mindful; to live fully in the present.

Think about it: the present is our only reality. The past is nothing but a memory, and the future is unreal; it has not yet come. We live in what Somerset Maugham called the razor's edge of the present. We do know that how we live in the present will shape the future. We want to create the kind of world that God would have us create; we want to be co-creators with God of ourselves and this world. As individuals and families, we do need to plan, to prepare, to save for the future. I am not convinced, however, that being anxious about the future is the least bit helpful.

I would like to share a conversation that took place on one of my trekking pilgrimages in Nepal and Tibet. Please allow me to indulge a little in these memories. Twenty-four years ago, I was happily planning my first trip, doing as much research as I could fit into a busy schedule, obtaining the necessary visas, and obsessing about what to bring. Since I am now significantly more than a third of the way through life, and since both my lungs are compromised, I know it probably wouldn't be wise to go back, but I miss the place. I guess I'm a little homesick for Tibet.

Our Nepalese Sherpa on my first trek in 1999 was a reserved and gentle Buddhist whose name was Ang Phuri. When I was struggling, weakened from the effects of an intestinal parasite that resulted in the loss of twenty-five pounds in one month (I call it the Nepalese diet), Ang Phuri walked behind me on the trail that wound through the Himalayan foothills of northwestern Nepal. When I say he walked behind me, I mean he walked *right behind me*, for the trail was only two or three feet wide at points, and Ang Phuri was afraid I was going to fall off the path and over the edge. He walked so close to me that I honestly believe he could have caught me if I stumbled. I really love the guy!

Our Tibetan guide on my second trek, my trek around Mt. Kailas and across the Tibetan plateau in 2001, was an outgoing and friendly Buddhist whose name was Thon Drop. Thon Drop had a sparkle in his eye and a subtle sense of humor. One evening when I went into the cook's tent, I encountered Thon Drop carving pieces of meat off a desiccated goat's leg and washing it down with beer. I teased him about this, reminding him that Buddhists are not only supposed to be vegetarians; they are not supposed to drink alcoholic beverages. Thon Drop replied in all seriousness that he does so only on special occasions. When I asked what the special occasion was, he replied that it was today, and today is a special day!

(I wondered if this were little more than a thinly veiled rationalization for taking a break from the Buddhist teaching that we should abstain from meat and alcoholic beverages—or

whether what Thon Drop said was really quite profound, that today, whatever day it is, is special. After all, as Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “Today is a gift. That’s why we call it the present.” It could also be both, but who am I to judge?)

One of the goals of my pilgrimage was to complete the 33-mile trek around Mt. Kailas, the sacred mountain of Tibet. Mt. Kailas is what T. S. Eliot might call “the still point of a turning world.” Both Hindus and Buddhists see this mountain as the intersection of space with the infinite, of time with the eternal. Tibetan Buddhists believe that one clockwise circumambulation, called a *kora*, wipes away the sins of a lifetime. Three *koras* are better, and thirteen even better. The completion of 108 *koras* guarantees instant nirvana and a clean slate for all your lifetimes. I confess that I am falling behind schedule for this! In all honesty, however, I think 108 *koras* would be a little ambitious even (or especially) for me. A few more, however, just might be possible! (Please don’t tell my wife that I am considering this!)

At the highest pass on the *kora*, the *Dolma-la*, we reached an altitude of 18,600 feet. At that altitude the atmospheric pressure is roughly half what it is at sea level and the air contains half as much oxygen. Unknown to me, I was also struggling from the effects of a paralyzed diaphragm and a collapsed lung. Thon Drop not only walked with me and encouraged me; he short-roped me for the last quarter mile. I put my trekking pole on his shoulder, and he pulled me along, thus enabling me to cover more ground between rest periods than I would have covered on my own. Thanks to his help, even though I was the oldest member of our trekking group by twenty years, I was the first to reach the top of the pass!

The conversation I would like to share with you probably won’t sound like much. As I approached the *Dolma-la*, about half-way through the *kora*, I was really struggling. Every time we reached the top of an incline, I hoped to catch a glimpse of our goal, the prayer flags at the top of the pass, but all I saw was the narrow trail winding on through the rocky terrain until it faded from sight. When, on one occasion, I asked Thon Drop if we were almost to the top, he replied that I shouldn’t worry because he knew a short cut.

I told you it wouldn’t sound like much, but I thought it was pretty funny! Think about it-- a short cut on a pilgrimage! If you’re trying to take a short cut on a pilgrimage, you have missed the point of the pilgrimage! I really thought it was funny! Then again, I wasn’t getting a lot of oxygen at the time. If you were cold, totally exhausted, and suffering from hypoxic delirium, you would probably think it was really funny, too! I guess you just had to be there.

As I relate my struggles and my experiences on these treks, it is dawning on me that I am not making a strong case for the sanity of my desire to return. But that’s not the point. The point is that, especially on a pilgrimage, we should not confuse the journey with the goal. The point is

that we can become so attached to an imaginary goal, which is always in the future, that we miss the present, the process, the journey that is our true spiritual calling.

Pessimistic people are anxious about the future. They make themselves sick thinking about all the bad things that might happen to them. People who are caught in this negative way of thinking are not happy people. They spend so much of their lives worrying about what might happen (and usually doesn't happen) that they fail to enjoy the gift, the blessings of the present. They fail to see, as Thon Drop said, that today is a very special day.

Optimistic people are more positive about the future, but optimism can become a trap. What if I told you that I am optimistic about the future of this church, that I have great hopes for this church? What if I presented you with a list of goals and objectives for the next few years? What if I told you I would like to see an average of forty people at worship next year and sixty the year after that? Many clergy and some parishioners do this. But there is a shadow side to setting these optimistic goals.

If I tell you I believe we can become a great church, a vital church, a successful church, doesn't this imply that we are not already a great church? If our goal is forty people at worship, then if we have twenty, as we do this morning, haven't we fallen short of our goal? But we haven't fallen short of our goal! This is the number of people who are here this morning. It is not half of some imaginary or ideal number. The people who are here are here! If this worship service helps you to understand God and yourself more fully, helps you to deepen your faith and your relationship with the living Christ, then we are doing what we are supposed to be doing. It is a mistake to focus more on the people who are not here than the people who are here.

Our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Study & Growth Group resumed this past Tuesday. To date, we have ten people who will be present regularly at our group meetings, and three who will be attending by Zoom. This meeting has traditionally been one of the high points of my week! Through the years, we have read some of the great spiritual classics from the Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, and Christian traditions. If I set a goal of twenty-six participants in the class, then the thirteen we have would be only half. But there is nothing wrong with the thirteen we have. I wouldn't trade them for anyone! (Although some of them do get a little unruly at times, a little carried away with chatting with each other rather than listening to the wisdom dispensed by their esteemed teacher.)

I have been told that this isn't the way that business works. I do know about goals and objectives, how important it is to grow market share, and I understand the importance of the bottom line. I just don't want us to become *attached* to this way of thinking. If we do a good job with the tasks that are entrusted to us in the present, a future will evolve. It may not be what we imagined. Then again, I'm not sure what we imagine is always what needs to come into being!

Several of the new people who have recently become full members of our church have said that they like the size of this church. They like being part of a church where everyone knows everyone, and everyone cares about everyone. If they wanted a bigger church, they would go to another church in the area. I'm not going to name this church, but by the front door there is a stand containing maps of the church so you can find your way around. When I mentioned this to our Diaconate several years ago, they said we could make a map if I wanted. All we need is a slip of paper with two words: upstairs and downstairs. Now that's a healthy response! There is no reason why we should be envious of another church! (Although I suspect that the senior pastor has a bigger office than I do, perhaps even with an exercise room attached, and his own reserved parking space. It's not that I have edifice envy—well, maybe a little.)

Two weeks ago, we gathered downstairs in the vestry for the first annual meeting we have held in three years. It was a time to think back over the trials and tribulations of the past three years, and also all we have to celebrate. There was a nice energy to the meeting—a lot of good-natured kidding and laughter, new members sharing new ideas. We set up the structures we need to move into the coming year, and we reaffirmed our commitment to share what we have, to share our gifts and talents with our church as we create our future together.

I think it's great to plan for the future! I only hope that we as a church don't become so caught up with our goals and objectives that we fail to celebrate what we already have. We can be open to growth and celebrate growth without building our lives around it and judging ourselves in relation to it, *i.e., without becoming attached to it*. Regarding our membership, it seems that every few years a couple of people discover us and decide to become a part of our community. How many do we need? I celebrate the gifts that our new members have brought to our church! They are people of faith! They are workers and givers! I hope they know how happy we are to see them here on a Sunday morning!

Think of the disciples following Jesus' crucifixion. Picture them gathered in a secret place, perhaps an upper room, feeling sad, depressed, confused, and overwhelmed by the unexpected turn of events. Peter says to the others, "Well, that certainly didn't turn out the way we thought it would!" The others agree. No, it didn't turn out the way they thought, hoped, or planned. Although they didn't know it at the time, it turned out better!

In the Parable of the Rich Fool Jesus tells us not to become so attached to our possessions that they become the center of our life. He tells us not to become so anxious about the future that we stop living in the present. He tells us not to become so greedy that we forget the joy of sharing, "for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." It makes sense to plan ahead, to prepare for the future as individuals, as a church, and as a nation, but we shouldn't

become so anxious about the future that we fail to live today in all its fullness. Today is all we have!

This is why Thon Drop's remark to me during the kora around Mt. Kailas was so insightful. It called me to reflect on the true meaning of pilgrimage. What was my pilgrimage all about? Was it about reaching the Dolma-la? Was it about completing the *kora* and returning to the place where we began? Was it burning away my *karma*, washing away the sins of this lifetime? *Or was it the process, the journey, and the experiences that shaped me deeply along the way?*

Without saying it, Thon Drop reminded me that the very idea of a shortcut on a pilgrimage is ridiculous. It totally misses the point! The important part of the pilgrimage is not the goal. It is not what lies ahead, either in place or time. It is the attitude we bring toward *each and every step*. It is the attitude we bring toward *each and every breath*. Jesus would remind us that we are all on a pilgrimage--the great pilgrimage of life. *He would also tell us that the kingdom of God is not some future state of affairs either on the earth or within us. It is already with us and within us.*

On this great pilgrimage of life, on this great spiritual pilgrimage, let us not become so focused on our future as individuals, as families, as a church, and as a nation that we fail to be present to life as it happens. Let us not become so focused on our goals, on imaginary ideals that we arbitrarily set up *and by which we judge ourselves* that we fail to live fully today and celebrate the many blessings that God has given us.

Then let us step forward into the challenge that Jesus places before us in the Parable of the Rich Young Man, which we heard last week, and the Parable of the Rich Fool, which we heard this morning: the call to share our material blessings and our spiritual gifts with our brothers and sisters who are in need around the world.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on the church website later this week.