

Bethany Presbyterian Church

4 June 2017

Matthew 5:9-7:27

God of the prophets, God of consuming fire, Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; in your covenant faithfulness send forth the fire of your Holy Spirit to accompany the reading and hearing of your Holy Word; that your truth and righteousness may be emblazoned upon our hearts. Set our souls on fire with a holy passion, that we may offer ourselves as living sacrifices of obedience and praise to you, the one and only True and Living God; through Jesus Christ who is our eternal prophet, priest, and King. Amen.

COPING WITH ANXIETY

A few years ago an issue of **U.S. News and World Report** carried a one-page feature which was entitled "Trying to Forget Anxiety." The summary at the top of the article read: "The summer rush to get away from it all is on. For millions of Americans, including Washington policy-makers, it is vacation time, darkened but not derailed by concern over problems pressing in." The body of the piece began: "Despite anxiety over the crisis in the North Korea and worry about the possibility of a recession at home, Americans seem determined to cast aside their cares for the moment and follow the rites of summer.

"By the millions, they are heading for the beaches, the mountains, hometown festivals, overseas vacations." But anxiety is a tenacious bug, as the article points out. "For many Americans, the undercurrent of anxiety went with them on holidays."

Our subject this morning is "Coping with Anxiety." I don't think it is necessary to develop a notion that frazzled nerves are at epidemic proportions, or to offer various psychological definitions of the subject. Most of us, if not all of us, have experienced first hand what anxiety is all about. We know that every new exercise program and diet and personal development scheme that comes along bills itself at the best way of soothing our turbulent and troubled soul. It seems everywhere we turn the subject pops

up to remind us our own inner turmoil is at least common. But this morning I'd like to move directly to Scripture and see what the Bible has to say on the subject of anxiety.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught the Lord's Prayer. As I read the forty-eight verses on the Sermon that comes after the Lord's Prayer, it seems to me that almost all of them pertain in one way or another to the subject of anxiety. The Lord's Prayer is the heading and maybe the best daily prescription for anxiety.

This morning let's go through certain snatches of the Sermon on the Mount and look at them in the light of the Lord's Prayer. Our central teaching will boil down to the fact that, if we are eaten up by anxiety, then perhaps in some ways Jesus Christ is not the center of our lives. Maybe for some reason we are not acknowledging him as our Lord and Savior; we're not obeying him, not trusting him. Whether we want to listen to the passage in one of John's letters that perfect love casts out fear (I John 4:18) or a passage in a letter to Timothy that we have not been given a spirit of timidity (II Timothy 1:7) the message rings loudly and clearly: When Jesus Christ is at the center of a life, anxiety is squeezed out of the center. The human psyche for some reason abhors a vacuum and when Jesus Christ is not in the place where he belongs, anxiety will rush in.

Some people may ask if just a little bit of anxiety is okay. I hope so. We are not talking this morning about just a little bit of anxiety. After all, some anxiety is inevitable. Some anxiety is necessary in this human journey to keep us stepping. We are really talking about the fact that in too many lives anxiety seems to run rampant. The question of the morning is whether we are building our lives on the rock of Jesus Christ or on the anxiety of sand.

Jesus said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6:19-21). According to Jesus, anxiety stems from having too much of our treasure on earth and not enough in heaven.

Billy Turner, trainer of the race horse Seattle Slew, said, "With a horse like this something bad can happen anytime. But what's the fun of having a horse that doesn't run fast enough to worry about?" That's a good point. It is a point that I think Jesus would take seriously. Jesus taught that in this earthly life bad things could happen at any time. Your racehorse might break its leg. But in our text he didn't preach against all racehorses, nor was he preaching against doing well, nor was he saying life in the fast lane is of the Devil. Jesus knew that many things in life bring us pleasure, give us fun. He did not and does not offer opposition per se.

A very insightful writer once put it, "We live not on things but on the meaning of things." To say that an object is treasure is to invest that object with a certain agreed-upon meaning, be it a sketch by Rembrandt, a watch your father gave you, or a 1952 Topps baseball card of Mickey Mantle. They have monetary and/or sentimental value because of the meaning society as a whole or you as an individual may have placed on them.

What Jesus is saying is, "Don't place too much value in the things of the world. If you do, you're going to be eaten up by anxiety because the things of the world are

going to pass away.” In time we are going to lose them and something deep within our soul knows that fact. If the ultimate meaning of who I see myself to be, my identity, my manhood, my worth, is all bound up in earthen vessels, then as Jesus said, my heart, my control center, will be relying upon these terminal objects and in time I will become an emotional basket case.

I would suggest to you that one of the reasons why anxiety is rampant in our society today is that the powers of this world, upon which we have relied for security and meaning have almost all of them over the last generation proven themselves to be fallible and inadequate. We have wound up in a very awkward position of leaning on what we sense is slipping away.

Sports Illustrated interviewed former Baltimore Orioles pitcher, Jim Palmer, in 1975. “Palmer looked almost wistful as he discussed the uncertain future. ‘I enjoy this game so much I’d like it to go on forever,’ he said. ‘It’s going to end, but I am going to do everything I can to prolong it. Baseball is the only thing I really know how to do. Look, you’re a man playing a child’s game, and you’re paid a great deal of money for doing it. That’s an unreal position to be in.’ He paused and rubbed his pitching arm gently. ‘The injuries do put things into proper perspective. I guess it’s God’s way of reminding you that nothing lasts forever.’”

God has lots of ways of reminding us of that one. The call of this particular passage is to rely on **our Father who is in heaven and whose Name is hallowed.** “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.

II

Jesus went on: “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.” You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matthew 6:24). The word **serve** stems from the Greek word **doulos** that means **slave**. We are talking here about ultimate obedience and ultimate loyalty. Mammon, in its simplest definition, means money. Now notice that Jesus does not say, “Christians, I sure wish you would stop serving money and me at the same time.” He doesn’t say that at all. Instead, he states a fundamental truth of human life - “You simply can’t do it.” Either a person will serve the Lord and be obedient to the Lord, or the person will serve money and be obedient to money. But, no one can do both.

Someone once said that the purpose of religion is to explain away the Sermon on the Mount. I suspect that this is one of the passages where most of the explaining away occurs. “Oh, to be able to serve money and still be a good Christian. Oh, if I could only go out and accumulate all that I could for myself and build up for me all that is possible, and then get all dressed up and go to church on Sunday morning, confess my sin, be forgiven, and go out the next day and accumulate all the more.”

God won’t have it. We have to choose. And the underlying message of these verses in context is that if we do not make the choice between God and mammon, we will be riddled with anxiety. We’ve already talked about the anxiety of relying on earthly treasures. Now we talk about the anxiety of refusing to make the choice in the first place.

Henri Nouwen has written many books. One of the shortest is **Making All Things New**. In it he tackles the question of why people worry so much. He believes

worry is a sign of being disconnected, not drawing strength from a central source. “Worry causes us to be all over the place but seldom at home.” He speaks of resentment, depression, isolation as symptoms of being disconnected. He also writes about boredom. “Boredom is a sentiment of disconnectedness. While we are busy with many things we wonder if what we’re doing makes any real difference. Life presents itself as a random and unconnected series of activities and events over which we have little or no control. To be bored therefore does not mean that you have nothing to do but that we question the value of the things we’re doing. The great paradox of our time is that many of us are busy and bored at the same time” (Henri Nouwen, **Making All Things New**, Harper & Row, 1981, p. 29-30). That, I would suggest to you, causes anxiety.

Jesus’ words apply aptly at this point. In terms of contemporary furniture, Jesus was saying that all of us are like lamps with long cords. Suppose the plug at the cord’s end came to the wall socket and saw that there were two sockets and said, “I’d like to be plugged into both.” The result would be a frustrated, disconnected plug. “You cannot serve God and mammon.” “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33). **They Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**

III

Our third formula for dealing with anxiety is the classic. “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the days own trouble be sufficient for the day” (Matthew 6:34). One person wrote, “Anxiety is the gap between the now and the then. If you’re in the now, you cannot be anxious because the excitement flows immediately into ongoing, spontaneous activity.” Notice that when

Jesus talks about tomorrow he uses the word “anxiety.” When he talks about today he talks about “trouble” and problems. We can’t really deal with anxiety. It is an undifferentiated uneasiness. But we can deal with trouble and we can solve problems. We are called to manage what is right in front of us. Of course, there needs to be some planning, some looking down the road to see what’s coming. But the productive Christ-centered life rejoices, “This is the day that the Lord has made.” “Man is born to live,” wrote Boris Pasternak in **Dr. Zhivago**, “not to prepare to live.” Now is the hour that we have been given.

Significantly, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he did it in conjunction with, “Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink.” (Matthew 6:25) God will provide. Trust him. Pray to him. Jesus taught us to say, “**Give us this day our daily bread.**” How much easier it would have been if we could come to church and pray once and for all, “Give us food for a lifetime.” Maybe Jesus wanted to make sure we had to pray the prayer everyday. This is the day when God will provide. This is the day to call upon him. Tomorrow, pray as well. But today is the day. Charles Spurgeon once wrote, “It has been well said that our anxiety does not empty tomorrow of its sorrows, but only empties today of its strength.” Today is the day. Live it. God will provide.

IV

Briefly, one final thought. Jesus went on to say, “Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” (Matthew 7:13-14)

It seems to me certain facts in the world today are obvious. One is that we live in an age of moral confusion. I think it is not without significance that in today's parlance "narrow" had become a dirty word. Might we draw the inference that in a society where "narrow" is a dirty word we are going to feel anxiety? We live in a day and age where people are saying, "You gotta do what you feel. You gotta get rid of your inhibitions and your defenses. Let it all hang out." Liberation, self-fulfillment, self-assertiveness. And one study after another is beginning to bring in hard, cold results in the ways in which anxiety begins to plague us, as we continue to live with this unbuttoned life-style.

Somebody comes along and says, "It's just because you can't handle it." I am not sure that we were created to handle it. I am not sure we were supposed to be able to handle it. What I do know is that the more libertine a society becomes the more anxiety that society is going to have. **"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."** The gate is narrow.

Quite frankly, I believe that I have only scratched the surface of what for many is a deeply felt subject. To be wholly candid, I feel rather anxious about that. But let me at least leave you with a kernel of thought. The opposite of anxiety is not tranquility. The opposite of anxiety is a Christ-centered life. If this day we invite Jesus Christ to come into the center of our lives, he is going to do it. This is the day. And when Jesus Christ is at the center of your life anxiety cannot be.

LET US PRAY

Lord Jesus, come into our lives. For Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen

God of light and of shadow, revealed but still hidden, your will is past our finding out, your ways beyond our knowing. Whence we come we understand only in part, and why we are here and whither we go are mysteries exceeding all our comprehension. Soon or late we recognize that we are mortal, and as our time of life on earth winds sown in prospect, we pray that you will give us wisdom for the journey before us. Save us from holding on too long or letting go too soon, and when the hour strikes for us to shut the store or close the desk or put away the tools, deny us self-pity, shield us from resentment, protect us from fear. Spare us the sins of arrogance, but withhold not from us the happiness of honest pride. Grant us satisfaction in miles traveled and plateaus reached, words spoken and chapters written, meals cooked and children reared, houses built and planes flown, minds calmed and bodies healed, strength bestowed and love shared. When we have done what we can, let there be no guilt that we do not what we cannot. Nevertheless, our Father, we would not so identify what we are with what we have done that, ending our formal employment, we assume that we have put an end to our reason for being. Were we not ever before we held a job, and did not life seem then experience to cherish? All through the days when we worked for our living was not life much more than our working, and was not meaning frequently found apart from our labor as in it? Break now, we pray, our lifelong bonding of doing work and being paid. Instruct us in the blessedness of giving with no wish for return. Lure us into kindness that pledge no compensation. Volunteer us for armies that fight only injustice. Prompt our hands to build homes for the homeless, cook food for the hungry. Warm our hearts to call on the sick and comfort the lonely, love the unlovely and bring hope to the hopeless. Living, we live by your choosing; else clearly we should not be living. Teach us not to waste the precious gifts you still bestow upon us. Retired, we are no less surely disciples of your Son. Keep us faithful in his service, who taught us to pray: "Our Father ..." Amen.