

When Less is More: Less Anxiety – More Prayer

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Dr. Tom Pace

Phil 4:4-13

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious 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. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you.

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me but had no opportunity to show it Not that I am referring to being in need, for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. Philippians 4:4-13 (NRSV)

Let's pray together. O God, open us up. Open our eyes so that we might see the world as you see it, full of love. Open our ears that we might hear your word in the midst of these words. Open our hearts that your word might fall in that we might feel your compassion/. Then, out of that compassion, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.

Ten or so years ago, we began a program here called “Unbinding your Heart.” Dee and I were in a small group, and that group has continued to meet monthly. Randy and Alice Helms are a part of that group. And what I’ve learned is that Randy knows every line from every movie that’s ever been shown. He can quote every movie, and every time in our Bible studies, he’ll say,

“It’s like in that movie ...” I asked him, “Randy, I need to tell you the best lines ever from any movie.” He said, “Number one is ‘Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.’” Everyone knows that one. He suggested, “You can’t handle the truth!” Jack Nicholson said that, and that’s a good one. He also suggested, “Toto, we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

My favorite he didn’t quote, and it’s from “Dumb or Dumber,” which is when he asks the girl, “What are the chances you and I could get together? One in ten?” And she says, “One in a million.” He says, “So you’re saying there’s a chance?”

I just love that one. One of the most powerful movie lines is from “Bridge of Spies.” I don’t know if you saw it. Tom Hanks plays James Donovan, who is an attorney who’s been assigned to defend Rudolf Abel, a Russian spy. So, he’s sitting in the cell with Abel, and he says, “You know they’re trying to send you to the electric chair.” And Abel says, “Uh-ha.” Then Donovan says, “You don’t seem alarmed.” And Abel says, “Would it help?” Later on, he says, “Are you never worried?” And Abel says, “Would it help?”

Would it help? Doesn’t help at all.

Peter Marshall, the great Scottish preacher, preached a sermon that is built around a sign. If you’ve ever been driving through the mountains and you see the warning sign that says, “Watch for falling rocks.” He says, “That’s the craziest sign in the world. Why would you watch for falling rocks? You can’t do anything about falling rocks. If it says, “Watch for fallen rocks, that would make sense. But if you spend your time with your eyes up looking for falling rocks all the time, then you’ll run off the road. Don’t watch for falling rocks! You can’t do anything about them!”

We are a people who spend lots of time watching for falling rocks. Lots of anxiety about things we can’t control.

The American Psychiatric Association did its annual survey and asked people what was going on in their souls. Here’s what they discovered in May of this year: “Seventy-three percent of people are either somewhat or extremely anxious about current events happening around the world. Sixty-four percent are extremely anxious or somewhat anxious about keeping themselves or their families safe. Sixty percent are anxious about their health generally. Thirty-two percent said they are more anxious than they were last year. And eighteen percent said they were less anxious.” So, more people are more anxious than they were last year in the midst of Covid than they are right now, Wow! We are an anxious people!

You wake up at 2 o'clock in the morning, and all of a sudden, all of it comes back to your head, and you begin to spin. Then you begin to think all about the problems at work and wonder how you ever will get them all solved. You don't see a solution, so you wonder how you're going to deal with them. Then you begin to think about that broken relationship you have and what you said or shouldn't have said. Or maybe even what you should have said. Then you struggle asking yourself, "Should I be forgiving? Or maybe not be forgiving? Or should I ask for forgiveness or not?" Then you begin to worry about your parents and your children and your friends, and then you worry about your health or money. Then you begin to worry that you're not sleeping enough and you're going to be tired the next morning. So, you're even worried about that. Indeed, we are anxious people.

In the midst of this, Paul writes something interesting. I want to talk today about four words. I'll begin with the letter "A" because every good preacher has to begin with the same letter. They're actually not the best words for it, but I wanted them all to begin with the letter "A." We're going to look at just two verses through most of this. The first word is indeed anxiety.

We have it. And in the midst of that, Paul writes, "Do not be anxious about anything..." Seriously? This is verse six. Look at it in your bulletin. "Do not be anxious about anything." That makes no sense. Of course, we'll be anxious!

What I want you to understand is that this word in Greek is written in what is called the perfect active tense ...no, that's not it; it's the present active tense, which indicates continuous action. It's something you're continuing to do. It's the same thing as when Jesus says, "Do not be angry; I tell you that if you're angry with your brother, you are liable for the judgment." That's in the present active tense. What he's saying is, "Don't stay angry at your brother." Here's he's saying, "Don't stay anxious."

Max Lucado writes this: "We might translate this verse 'Do not let anything leave you perpetually breathless and in angst. Yes, the presence of anxiety is unavoidable, but the prison of anxiety is optional.'" We don't have to stay anxious.

So thankfully, Paul gives us an antidote, a response. He says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer"

Remember that the basic premise that we've been looking at is that God does not want our lives to be empty. When we remove things, when we have *less* of something, the purpose of that is that we can fill it with something more important, something better. God wants us to have a full and abundant life, but full of the right things.

Nature abhors a vacuum. So in order to get something out, you have to put something in. And what Paul's saying is that the way you deal with this anxiety is you push it out with prayer. That prayer is the solution to deal with your anxiety and fear.

This last Wednesday, Dee and I took two of our grandchildren – two five-year-olds – to the Aquarium downtown. Their brothers had started school, and they were unhappy that they didn't get to start school yet. So off we went to the Aquarium. They ate macaroni and cheese and looked at the fish, and then we went outside to ride the rides that are outside at the Downtown Aquarium. We went to that big Ferris Wheel with the gondolas on it. Dee said, "Take the kids on that." (Well, thanks...) So, I do, then one of them says, "Yeah, let's go on that." And the other one was hesitant about it. He was like paralyzed or frozen. They coaxed him, and his cousin was saying, "Come on! Come on!" So, he came on. Then we started to move, and he was white as a sheet. The whole time. He sidled up next to me, and I have my arm around him. Because he was so afraid, I just started talking to him. I said, "Hey, look at that! Look over there! What color is that building? See the stripes? What color is that?" And he said, "Red." So we started to talk, and as we talked, I could feel him thaw; it was going to be okay. He realized that it was going to be okay because he was talking to his Pop.

I must confess that when we got to the top, and it stopped while they let people off at the bottom and I'm looking over the edge, I began to picture what would happen if one of them tried to climb over. I wondered what I'd do. I knew I had to start talking to him – and to keep talking! I'm going to be okay. But it's the same way we can deal with our anxieties – we can talk to our Pop. We talk, and it's in that conversation because the anxiety eases with connection to the one we trust. It's like anxiety is a navigational tool for us. It prompts us to turn to the God we've got to count on. In everything, in every situation with prayer.

Now let's get more specific, and we're going to keep reading. In the New International Version which you have in your bulletin, it says, "In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving..." That's also in the New Revised Standard Version. So, appreciation is the next word. How do you pray? Well, you begin with appreciation, with thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving is a learned practice. There's a sort of beginner-level thanksgiving that says, "I'm going to thank people for something nice they did. Or something they gave me." You write a thank you note to your grandparents. If someone does something for you, you say, "Thank you for that." You teach kids to say thank you when someone says something nice. That's beginner level – that's the basics.

The next level is what I call novice thanksgiving. That says, "I'm going to notice the things that I ordinarily take for granted and be thankful for them. I'm going to realize how blessed I am that I have a house to live in, a car to drive, and a good job. I have some people who love me. When I turn on the water, water comes out. I have a bed to sleep in and sheets. I am incredibly blessed, just with these very basic things in life. And that's an incredible blessing, and I'm going to be thankful for those things. Though much of the time I just take these things for granted, I'm going to choose thanksgiving for these." That's sort of the novice level.

But when you move to advanced thanksgiving, you begin not to just notice the good things but to notice the bad ones, and still, you're thankful. And to be thankful even *for* those things. Advanced thanksgiving says, "I'm going to be thankful even for the challenges I face because they drive me to my knees, and they drive me to a closer relationship with Christ. I'm going to be thankful because they temper and refine me. They make me throw the things out that don't matter. They make me stronger. I'm going to choose to be thankful – even for my trials. Even for my challenges." That's advanced thanksgiving.

Then there's master-level thanksgiving. That says, "I don't know what this world's going to hold for me, but God's grace is enough, and when it's all said and done, God is going to make it right. God's going to put the world back together the way it's supposed to be. And God's going to take me home, and I'm going to be with him. So, whatever happens, today or tomorrow, I'm good. And I'm thankful for God's grace shown to me in Jesus Christ. No matter what!"

When we practice that thanksgiving in our prayers, that's how we begin to relieve that anxiety.

So, there's appreciation. Then he goes on, "But in everything by prayer ..." The NIV says, "and supplication," and the NRSV says, "And petition" ... with thanksgiving, let your request be made known to God. Authenticity. Tell God what you want; tell God the truth.

Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount that God already knows what you need before you ask him. Paul says, “We don’t know how to pray as we ought, but the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.” You don’t pray to sort of make God happy, to say the things God wants to hear. No, we’re trying to build a relationship. That’s the point of prayer – to build this close relationship with God, intimacy, partnership with God. And the way you build any relationship is to tell the truth of what’s in your heart and soul. God can handle it.

The Psalms are sometimes called “the prayer book of the Bible.” When the Children of Israel were in exile the psalmist writes: “Oh, daughter of Babylon, blessing on ye who takes your babies’ heads and dashes them against the rocks.” What a pleasant prayer! But it’s honest. It was just reaching out to God with anger and pain and all of those things and telling the truth.

On Friday, we had a memorial service here in the Sanctuary for Pamalah Tipps. Many of you knew her, she was an incredible woman. She’d been in a battle with metastatic breast cancer for some time, and it had reoccurred. In the years before she passed, she was such a demonstration of faith to me. I learned so much, as we all did, I think. Here’s what she wrote in an email: “This morning before I went to my MD Anderson appointment to learn the results of yesterday’s scan, I read 2 Corinthians 8:11 over and over. It was my comfort and my hope, and my standard that flew above me. I’ve inserted ‘I’ and ‘My’ for ‘We’ and ‘our.’” Paul had used the plural; she made it singular. She said, “Indeed, in my heart, I felt the sentence of death, but this has happened that I might not rely on myself but on God who raises the dead. He has delivered me from such a deadly peril - and he will deliver me. On him, I have set my hope, and he will continue to deliver me as you help me by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on my behalf for the gracious favor he has granted me and answer to the prayers of many.”

She was saying, “I’m going to get well – he will deliver me.” That’s an honest prayer.

Later she wrote this: “My prayer is that the cancer indeed will be contained for a long time. I continue to ask God to destroy this disease. But no matter what happens, I trust his grace and mercy on my life.”

I couldn’t help but think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Honest prayer, “God, if there’s any way, take away this cup from me. I don’t want to do this. Nonetheless, not what I will but what thou will.” Statement of surrender. Authentic, real prayer. Because that builds that relationship.

Now there's one more thing that I want us to see here. That is the word *activity*. Jump with me to verse 9, where Paul writes: "As for the things that you have learned or received or heard in me – or noticed in me (NIV)..." It then says, "Do them," and the NRSV says, "Put into practice." Do something! Now it could be he's saying, "Quit being anxious about something, do something about it." I don't know how much of the time I spend worrying about stuff that I could just do. Just make the decision and move on instead of fretting. Do it. But I don't really think that's what he's getting at. I think what Paul's getting at is that he's saying, "Look, I've taught you a certain way of life, a certain discipline, a certain structure. And you can take hold of that structure when things get difficult. When you're anxious, you have that structure that's there."

Parker Palmer tells the story of how in the Midwest when winter was coming, the farmers would run a rope from the back door of their house to the barn so when the blizzards came, they could follow the rope to get to the barn to feed the animals. Then follow it back again. Something to hang on to when the blizzards come. Something to guide you when the blizzards come.

Or another illustration is if you're planting grapes, you have to put in a trellis. That gives structure to the grapevine. It gives it something to climb, to hang onto so that the grapes don't sit on the ground and rot. It makes the fruit work. And we need that structure. I like to think of it as a skeleton. It's not faith, but it's what we hang our faith onto. The muscle is our faith. Being a Christian doesn't mean going to church and reading the Bible and saying your prayers. That doesn't make you a Christian. No, being a Christian is this relationship we have with Jesus. But the structure we hang it on is these habits.

That's why here at St. Luke's, we have five habits. We don't have five values because values are something you believe in, and you think. We have habits and those habits give us a structure that we can hang onto. We pray and worship, we study the Bible, we make friends, weaving ourselves together into the lives of others to a fabric that can help sustain us when things are difficult. We tell our stories to encourage one another. To tell the world about Jesus. And we give ourselves away in generosity and service. In all of these things are these habits that we try and put into practice because that gives us something to just hold onto.

So, what's the payoff? What's the payoff when that anxiety triggers you that navigational tool kicks in and you choose to pray. You pray with appreciation, with authenticity, you've built a practice, an activity that gives you something to hang onto – what's the payoff?

In both verse 6 and verse 9, they're followed by the payoff. Here's verse six: "And the peace of God which surpasses/transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7). The Peace of God. In verse 9: "As for the things you have learned to receive and heard and seen in me do them. And the God of peace will be with you." (Philippians 4:9b) Peace of God – the God of Peace.

One of the things I've been trying to practice as I wrestle with anxiety sometimes is mental imaging. Sometimes when my kids were growing up, we would go to Destin, Florida, and we would go to the beach. If I could take a float out on the beach and go way out to where the waves weren't breaking but out there where they're going up and down and get on that float and just feel myself go up and down on the waves a certain peace is there. It says that life is going to go up and it's going to go down, and I'm going to be supported and sustained. Imagining that just gives me that sense of trust.

But more often, I try and remember what it was like to be five years old. Do any of you remember what it was like to be five? I can't remember at all, so I have to imagine it. I imagine myself walking with my parents, my mom, and my dad, and suddenly there's a threat, and something scares me. So, what do I do? I move over and reach up and hold their hand. And as I do that, I realize I'm all right. That I have a loving parent who loves me so much that they're not going to let me go.

Friends, we have a loving God who loves us so much that won't let us go. Yes, of course, we'll be anxious, but that's just a reminder to reach up and take hold of a hand.

Gracious God, we confess our anxiety. You know that we get anxious, of course, we do, but you help us with that. You give us the power of prayer. That we might learn the practices of appreciation, authenticity, authentic prayer, of practicing the disciplines and structures, so we have something to hold onto when the blizzards come. O God, we reach up to you today and take hold of your hand. Don't let us go. Amen.