

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost/October 23, 2016

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The scriptures today speak to our anxiety and if we can manage it, the joy that exists beyond. This week I have been with one in the hospital, another in hospice, several who are grieving. And all of this on top of the background radiation of a polarized society. And no matter who you are for, the final Presidential debate did nothing to alleviate any of the anxiety that settles upon us like a wet, woolen blanket. In our prayer this morning, that we call the collect, we asked for an increase in faith, hope, and charity. Why? Because they are in such short supply. There is not sufficient faith, hope, and charity for us to hold onto. We often feel adrift in a sea of anxiety.

One of the sources of anxiety in a political year is opposition research. One side uncovers as much negative information about the other as possible. It piques the insecurity in each of us that if another knew about me what I know about me they wouldn't like me very much. What if our disobedience like that of Adam and Eve were made apparent for all to see? Like them we would want to cover it up. Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries, once played a practical joke on twelve others. They were all well-known, respected, and stand-up individuals, pillars of their community. This is before the age of the internet, so he sent each of them a telegram with the same message. "Flee at once. All is discovered." And within 24 hours each one had left the country! Deep down there are things, minor or not, that are a source of embarrassment and anxiety for all of us.

The thing about unmanaged anxiety is that it blinds us. We can't see past it. We can't imagine that God listens to us. A mended world that we know as a heavenly kingdom seems remote. Words of praise such as "To him

be the glory,” get stuck in our mouth. It is hard to believe that in the final analysis we will go home justified.

So how do we manage this anxiety? We can't, I think, nor would we want to remove all anxiety. A normal level of anxiety is stimulating. It can increase our awareness or even our zest for living. Without some anxiety I imagine we would all be reduced to a puddle on the floor. But how about the anxiety that would cause us to flee or hide rather than face what is before us? The anxiety that blinds us to a brighter future? Well, we can deny it and get on with life, and I suppose there is nothing wrong with a little denial. Or we can project it onto others. She's unfit, he's unfit, in the political discourse of the day. But the key to managing anxiety seems to be a connection to God. The theologian Paul Tillich suggested that the crucial question of life was whether we are safe in some deity's care, or trudging along pointlessly in an indifferent universe? Our attachment to an ultimately loving God appears to make all the difference.

So now the question arises, how do we secure this connection to a loving God? First, the Wisdom of Sirach suggests that we connect by giving. “Give to the Most High as he has given to you, and as generously as you can afford.” Not more than you can afford. Not as external show. Not indifferently, but lovingly to a caring deity. It is not about supporting an institution, that's a by-product. In the same way Peter Drucker used to argue that profit is a by-product. Earlier in the Gospel of Luke Jesus said, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” That's not a come-on. It is simply saying giving generously connects you to a generous God. The benefit is that you know, deeply in your bones, that you are not alone. You know deeply in your heart that God listens to you, that your deepest needs are being heard. A secure anchor to the ground of our being (as Tillich would describe God) holds us in a sea of anxiety.

We also tighten our connection to God through prayer. As with giving, genuine prayer is not an external show, nor is it indifferent. It is not congratulating oneself in giving ten percent of one's income while disparaging another. Prayer does not create distance but unifies. To show this, Jesus tells a parable.

The Pharisee was standing by himself, the tax collector was standing far off, and God was standing by them. To the self-reliant Pharisee God's standing near was unnecessary. He was self-contained. Anxiety was denied, and projected onto the tax collector who was clearly crooked, without a leg to stand on. The tax collector was overcome with anxiety. He was a collaborator with the oppressive Romans. His hands were not clean. But his inclination was true. His thoughts were of God. His mind was on God. His heart was open to God. "Be merciful to me, a sinner," he prayed. Prayer is not controlling, but a letting go. The tax collector gave himself up to God's will which is the wellbeing of all. In prayer he found a compassionate God and was able perhaps to find some compassion for himself. Though he had been through a desolate valley, as the psalm says, in God he found a place of springs, a source of refreshment. So genuine prayer brings us, in humility and contrition, to God who holds us when otherwise anxiety might get out of hand.

Once the tax collector can manage his anxiety by connecting with God he can begin to glimpse a new and bright future. It is of a homecoming in which he is justified. His life became aligned with God in a way that would be out of reach for the Pharisee as long as that person trusted in himself apart from God. Homecoming is a future where we are at one with God and each other. In that relationship we experience love, forgiveness, and refreshment.

A new day brings with it the prospect of love's victory and a crown of righteousness. You can barely see them and even with binoculars it is hard to see the detail. But above us where the arches meet at the peak of the ceiling there are angels carved in wood. Each angel holds a crown, a crown of righteousness, reserved for all who long for God's mercy and refreshment. Righteousness is a relationship word, like justification. We are made one with God, aligned with God's purpose. We do not stand off from others like the Pharisee, but are united in our humanness and our need for God's mercy.

So our journey is one of homecoming in which we are justified, and victory in life for which we are crowned. It is easy to be consumed with anxiety today. Ours is a world deficient in faith, hope, and charity. We pray for these gifts, and this prayer helps bring our anxiety under control. Giving connects us with God who stabilizes us in the midst of insecurity. Have mercy

on us, God. Stand by us, God. Listen to us, God. And the future opens up: the victory of love; and a homecoming that awaits us all.

Amen.