

Trinity United Methodist Church

March 15, 2020

“Talking With God: Crazy Town”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Good morning, friends. Pastor Dan here in the office at Trinity United Methodist Church, missing gathering with all of y'all this morning. But it is good that we have technology that we can practice social distancing, as they say; but we don't have to practice social isolation. So that's a good thing.

Other folks have more elaborate set-ups, and we're just going to shoot from the hip a little bit this morning. So as we get started, let's start off in a word of prayer, shall we?

God, we give thanks for this day. We give thanks for this opportunity to join together virtually as we seek to continually worship You. It's a great reminder that church is not a building. Church is not a particular room or place or anything like that, but the church is wherever Your people gather, wherever Your people are. So as we gather virtually, help us to be the Church together, by the power of Your spirit.

We lift to You all of those in our congregation who especially need our prayers and especially need Your presence. We pray for Your continued healing touch on members, not just of our congregation and families, but indeed throughout the world. We pray, Lord, that you would literally heal our land and our world right now. Help us to stay cool-headed. Help us to make smart decisions, not just for our sake, but indeed for the sake of others. We thank you for this opportunity in which we can be much more aware of the very much global village in which we live, which we can easily lose sight of, especially in small towns like ours here in Smithfield. We are all connected as one great human family together, especially as the body of Christ throughout the world.

And so we lift to you those who are on the front lines, responding to this virus and this disease. We pray for all those who have become sick. We pray for those who have lost family members to this disease. We pray for even more dire situations like in Italy and in Iran and other places we read about in the news and hear about. And Lord, if that's going to be our situation here in a couple of weeks, we pray that You would give us the grace and the understanding to do what we need to do to keep each other safe and free from home.

So for all these things and more that we carry in our hearts this day, we know that You know it all before we even think to ask, so we trust You, we thank You, we love You, and in Christ's name we pray, amen.

We're continuing the Talking With God series, so our scripture this morning comes from Philippians chapter 4, verses 4 through 7. This is Paul writing to the church in Philippi.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. This is the Word of God for the people of God—and you can say it where you're sitting, in your PJs or whatever—*Thanks be to God. Amen.*

So, (audio/video breaks up) before all the craziness in our world right now went down, so this shows that Scripture is always timeless and always appropriate, right? And the sermon title for this morning is "Crazy Town." By the way, I don't think I've mentioned it just yet, but the source material for this sermon series is a book by Adam Weber. He is a United Methodist pastor in South Dakota, pastor of a church called Embrace. He wrote a book called *Talking With God*, so that's sort of the base material, and I've been adding my own to that. And he's got this chapter called "Crazy Town." And Crazy Town, indeed, could probably be a good definition of our world right now. If you're like me, particularly the end of this past week was pretty sucky, right? It sucks to have everything we've been looking forward to be canceled, and that's very much where I was Friday. I had a race coming up, Youth were supposed to go to a Casting Crowns concert Friday night...*everything*, right? And I get all the precautions. I think we're doing what we should do. But at the same time, I know others are in a similar boat. We were supposed to gather with friends this afternoon from Northern Virginia; we can't do that now. So it's good to name that, just to say, yeah, that's part of the emotional processing, I think, that we're all doing. But I hope you're like me, and the more we continue to pray about it, the more God's giving us the peace we need and that hopefully life will be back to normal before we know it.

But indeed we're living in a bit of Crazy Town right now, and potentially even crazier as this virus plays out and we follow directions from those in authority over us. But, at the same time, it's kind of a nice break, isn't it, from the regular Crazy Town that life typically is? With having nowhere to be the last couple of mornings, we've slept in. It's been *glorious*. Right? To be able to live life at a more leisurely pace...heck, you can stay in your PJs all day if you want to, right?

So normal Crazy Town is running here, there and everywhere, all kinds of different appointments, getting kids where they need to be, all the craziness that life brings. Even if you're single, life can still be a rat race. So it can be easy to say, "who's got time for God? Who's got time to pray?"

I shared a couple weeks ago, if you're like me, you say, "It's Lent. I'm going to get up an hour earlier to pray, an hour earlier than the rest of the household," so you set your alarm. But you went to bed late the night before, so you're tired, so you hit "snooze" a little too much, and then it's time, everybody's got to get up and get everybody out the door, get yourself out the door, or whatever the case might be. So you say, "Oh, well, I'll pray later," take that intentional time of prayer later. "Later" comes and goes, you get to the end of the night, lay your head on the pillow, you go, "Oh, yeah, I was going to pray more today, so you try to pray a little extra, and you're out, right?"

Too often, unfortunately, prayer is one of the first casualties in a busy life. I know that's true for my life, I know it's true for many. And we can all admit, that's not the way it should be. Right?

So, in our scripture for today, Paul gives us some pretty specific instructions. First of all, he says to rejoice in the Lord always. And again, in case we didn't get it the first time, he says, "I will say it again: Rejoice." Especially right now. With all of the "Ugh, everything's getting canceled. Life's getting canceled." All that stuff, it's easy to throw little pity parties for ourselves. In normal life, it's easy to throw pity parties for ourselves, right? Invite as many people as we can to those pity parties. But Paul says, "Rejoice."

The story is told of my grandfather, Papa Elmore, that he used to have a job with the water company, working outside all the time, digging ditches, things like that. People would ask him what he thought about the weather, and his default answer was, "It's just right. We can't do a thing about it, so it might as well be just right." And I think that's a good attitude for life, and what Paul is getting at here.

We have a choice, right? We can be down. Yes, depression is real and things like that. But even in the midst of the darker times, we can still choose to rejoice, and specifically in the Lord, because the Lord is *always* with us. The Lord is the *source* of our joy, even and especially in those darker moments of life. And even now, Jesus is still on the throne, and God is always still with us, right? So it's just right, so rejoice.

Paul goes on to say, "Let your gentleness be evident to all." And when I was reading over that before I hit "Go live," here, I was like, "Wow. *That's* a good word for right now." Right? Especially with all of our opinions we can be posting on Facebook. You know, this all *might* be a huge overreaction to this virus. But, I just want to remind us as Christians, we are to be purveyors of truth and of Gospel and of hope. So sharing all of the conspiracy theories: Friends, it's just not helpful right now. It's not really helpful

anytime, but especially right now. And posting our opinions of the decisions that our officials might make—it's just not helpful right now. What is helpful is to bear witness to our faith, especially as we *might* venture out to the stores that have been overrun; hopefully that craziness has died down a bit. But through it all, let your *gentleness* be evident to all. I think that's one of the best postures we can take as Christians to all this craziness going on around us.

So Paul goes on in verse 6: "Do not be *anxious* about anything." Jesus said "Don't worry," right? Again, that doesn't do a lot of good right now, so ask for help from the Holy Spirit to help us not be anxious. And if you've read any of the letters from our bishop, Bishop Lewis, she encourages all of us, clergy as well as laity, to be a nonanxious presence right now in the midst of so much anxiety. That's another best way that we can witness to our faith, is not give in to the hysteria that is going on out there.

So don't be anxious about anything...but here we go, here's where we get to prayer: "But in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." You know, one of the things that I find people, as they talk to me about prayers and their own struggles with prayer—and I've witnessed it in my own life—is that somehow we've bought into this thing that we can't pray to God about the small stuff in life. I mean, students in school: "Dear God, help me to do my best on this test." Now that doesn't mean, of course, if we haven't studied and prepared, God's going to help us miraculously get an "A." God doesn't work like that. God gave us a head on our shoulders with a brain in it, and that's to use it.

But it's this thing of, whatever we might be struggling with, we might think, "I shouldn't bother God with that." Paul's pretty clear here. "In every situation," no matter big or small, "by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." Pray to God about *anything and everything*. Again, as we've shared over the last couple of weeks, God as our heavenly Father, or heavenly parent, if that's the way you want to think of God—God's bigger than any adjectives we can come up with—God is just like our earthly parents or guardians or whoever raised us. They would rather just hear a simple "hello" from us than to hear nothing at all, right? And God is, indeed, the same way. "Hey, God. This is what's going on right now. Just checking in with you. Catch you later." That's an awesome prayer. "In every situation," even in the small stuff, "by prayer and petition." So that's what we're talking about here, right? Talk with God as you talk with a friend. And we'll come back to that in a minute.

Paul then adds in there, "with thanksgiving." And I think sometimes we forget that, right? I know many times in my life, and I'm a pastor, right? I've fallen off the prayer wagon in my prayer life. A crisis hits, and "Oh, gosh, we need to pray about that." So it's the, "God, sorry it's been a while. This is what's going on." We pray to God about it, and then whatever happens, the situation gets resolved, whatever the case might be, then

we forget to go back to God to say, “Hey, wow, thank you for showing up. Thank you for taking care of this. Thank you for being present.” Even if God doesn’t answer our prayers the way we want; “God, thank you. I know you’re there. Please help me to see how you’re in this.” We’re quick to *ask* God for a lot of things; we need to also go back later and go back over that prayer list—it’s where it’s helpful to keep a written prayer list a lot of times, or to journal. Go back and read. Every time I go back through my journal, I’m like, “Wow. I remember being really stressed about that, but it’s amazing how God resolved that. But I never went back to thank God for the way that He took care of what I was really, really stressed about at the time.” So I think that’s a really important piece is to always remember that. It’s one thing to thank God in our prayers for generalities. But again, going back and specifically looking at how God has responded to our prayers, to then thank God for the specific ways that He has responded.

Then, “present your requests to God.” And Paul concludes, “and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” And for right now, the word *guard* just really jumped out at me. It is so easy in today’s world to get cynical, to get pessimistic, to just really get a sour attitude. How do we guard against those things? It’s rejoicing. It’s letting our gentleness lead the way. It’s not being anxious. It’s talking to God about even the small stuff in life. And giving thanksgiving to God for even the small stuff in life. And we’ll find the more and more we do that, the more and more the peace of God, that transcends all understanding—we don’t begin to understand this virus stuff going on right now, right? We’re trusting those who know more about it. We don’t need to, right? The peace of God which transcends all understanding will *guard* our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus and *guard* our hearts to keep us from getting pessimistic and cynical and all those more negative things.

So Paul also says in 1 Thessalonians, “Pray without ceasing.” And again, we talk about how crazy normal life is. How in the world can we pray without ceasing? So here’s a few practical ways that we can pray without ceasing.

- We’ve all got a lot of time on our hands now, right? Use it wisely. Spend some extra time in prayer together as a family as well. You can’t come to worship as a family; read some Scripture together. Talk with your kids about it and see what they might have to say about these Scriptures, and take time to pray together.
- Remember from that first sermon of the series? Talk with God like we talk with a friend. Right? Picture Jesus riding with you in your car. You’re not supposed to be going anywhere right now, so don’t do that. Picture Jesus chilling on your couch with you while you watch TV. Hey, it might change what you’re watching on TV, right? And talk with Jesus through the day. Talk with God through the day like you’re talking with a friend who’s there

in your house with you, in your vehicle with you, whatever the case might be.

- As we talked about last week, you don't have to pray any long, elaborate prayers with magic formulas. Take a cue from our kids. Keep it short, keep it simple, keep it honest. Sometimes you're driving down the road, you encounter somebody and say, "Wow, God, look at that crazy person." And here's the other piece out of all this, too: Listen how God might talk *back* to you; how God might respond to you. God will often say, "Heh—take a look at yourself, buddy." Right? Keep it short, keep it simple. Be honest. If we're mad, tell God we're mad. If we're down, tell God we're down. God can handle all of the emotions. He created us with all of these emotions to have.
- When it comes to praying without ceasing, also, there's an ancient writer, a monk named Brother Lawrence. And he wrote one of my favorite kind of old-school, ancient devotional books called *Practicing the Presence of God*, or *The Practice of the Presence of God*. In it he talks about how so many times we think of prayer as something that we have to add on to an already busy schedule of our lives. And that is an aspect of prayer. It is helpful to set aside intentional time, to write it on your schedule. "At this time I am going to pray." But he said it's not *just* that. That prayer, instead of being just one more thing to add to an already busy life, is actually something that we need to take on in the *midst* of life. He wrote about practicing prayer in the act of washing dishes. And that's one of the reasons why it's my favorite book, because I *hate* doing the dishes. I don't like those menial, repetitive tasks in life. So doing the dishes—oh, my golly. I just hate doing it. So, you can practice the presence of God even while washing the dishes: "Hey God, thanks for this sink full of dishes; thanks for these dishes all over the counter that my family didn't put in the dishwasher," whatever the case might be. "Thank you for the food that's still *crusted* on the dishes because my family didn't rinse it off..." That's my family. Maybe yours too. But hey, "Thank you that we *have* dishes. Thank you that we have *food* to put on those dishes." It's just a conversation with God, right? And before you know it, the dishes are done, and it really wasn't all that terrible. So prayer in the midst of life.
- Part of that, too, is to change that vocabulary around it. You've heard me talk about this before. From "I *have to*" to "I *get to*." And so it's not that, "Ugh, I've *got to* get up early and pray." It's "I *get to* get up a little earlier

and pray.” Or, “I forgot to pray this morning, so I’ve *got to* do it.” “I *get to* continue to do this.” Right? And that makes all the difference in the world.

- There’s two spiritual practices that have been practiced through the ages that can help us with focusing and prayer and can help us pray without ceasing. Number one is one that I love to do that I recommend all the time to people. It’s called the Breath Prayer. Some people call it the Jesus Prayer. It’s where, especially in normal crazy life, the rat race of life that we’re more or less used to, when we can easily get bent out of shape in traffic and things like that, and part of that is our heart rate rises in response to stress, right? So just to begin to pay attention to our breathing and deliberately slow the breathing down, deep breaths in and out. And then add scripture to that. One of the usual recommended scriptures with that in this practice is, as you breathe in, “Jesus, have mercy on me,” and as you breathe out, “a sinner.” It comes from the blind Bartimaeus, when they’re on their way through Jericho. And blind Bartimaeus is sitting there, and that’s what he calls out. “Jesus, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” So just use that mantra; you can use other scriptures, your favorite ones, whatever. And the idea is that you breathe in God, breathe in the Spirit, and then you breathe out whatever that negativity is. It sounds a little meditative, Eastern, whatever. Yeah, that’s the point. It’s a good practice from that culture. It’s to breathe in the Spirit and breathe out that negativity. And in that, to pray repetitively, whatever it is for you.
- We also call that centering prayer. And the hymn in the sanctuary services that we were going to sing today to close the service is “Come And Find The Quiet Center.” It’s in The Faith We Sing, the little black hymnal that you find in the pews. “Come And Find The Quiet Center.” And that is what prayer helps us do in the midst of life that we might call Crazy Town.
- The second spiritual practice that comes from through the ages is called “Praying the Office.” And no, that does not mean praying like Michael Scott or Dwight Schrute or anybody like that. No. Praying the Office is an ancient practice that actually comes from monastic communities, where they have set aside regular times throughout the day to pray. As you grew up and you maybe went to camp, you might have at the end of the day had a little thing called vespers. That is a term that comes directly from the Office, which is those set times throughout the day. I cannot remember any of them right now except for that one. But the idea is to have a time early in the morning when you first get up, to have maybe an intentional time of prayer as you get to work, maybe before you get out of your

vehicle and go into work. Just pause, have an intentional time of prayer for God to be with you throughout the day. Around lunchtime, to stop and pray intentionally as well. I read a book about this, and they talked about how they had a lunch date scheduled with a friend, and the friend's watch beeped at a certain point. The friend said, "Oh, excuse me for a moment. I'll be back in just a few moments." So they thought maybe the friend just needed to go to the rest room or something. This person needed to go to the restroom, so they got up and walked by the lobby of the restaurant and saw their friend sitting there alone on the couch in the lobby, in prayer. So they went on to the bathroom, they both get back to the table and the question arose, "So, what were you doing?" "Oh, I was praying the Office. It was time to just take a few moments and go off by myself and pray." Just two or three minutes, then come back and rejoin whatever activity you've got going on. So you've got the morning times, you've got noon, 3 p.m. I think has been a traditional time and they're really strict following it, but then dinner time and then traditionally at sunset and then when you go to bed later at night. You don't have to do all of them. There is a little book called *The Field Guide for Daily Prayer*, and it's a great help that I use that has even just morning and evening times to guide you through those prayer times. So Google it, Praying the Office. If Michael Scott and Dwight Schrute and Jim and Pam come up, that's not what you're looking for.

So through it all, and I think it's a word for the world in which we're living right now, a life of prayer is a marathon and not a sprint, right. So that race that I was training for in a couple of weekends was the Monument Avenue 10K. Up until recently, I've been doing a run/walk method, run for a few minutes and then walk for a minute and so forth. But I really wanted to run this whole race. But in order to run double the distance that I was used to running (it's 6.2 miles), I actually had to go slower in my pace, when I've been working so hard on trying to go faster in my pace. Because I elected to run a longer distance, I actually have to slow down, and I hated that at first. I can do almost a 9-minute mile! Why can't I keep that up for 6 miles? Come on, let's do this! And the experts tell you, if you try to do that and you don't slow down for those longer distances, you're going to hurt yourself. Guess what? I did. Thankfully not all that badly. Finally I realized, you know what? These experts know what they're talking about.

And prayer is a marathon, but I also think it's a word for the world we live in right now. Friends, I think this virus thing is going to be a marathon and not a sprint. And it sucks at first to have life disrupted in this major way. But I don't think it's coincidental that this has fallen for us Christians during this season of Lent. The season of Lent is

meant to slow us down. The reason we give up favorite activities or TV shows is to hit “Pause” and to have more time available to focus on God, to focus on prayer, to focus on Scripture. Not that God has caused this virus and this disruption—I want to be clear on that. No, absolutely not. We live in a fallen world, and this is one of the results of that. Okay? You know my favorite bumper sticker theology: *Stuff happens*. This is a major pile of it, a major case of that.

God, however, is working through these circumstances. He can work through us as people to show the world: Hey, wow. It’s a *good thing* to slow down and to find more time with family, with small groups of friends, and to connect with nature. Get outside, they say. To connect with each other, to connect with God in prayer. The fact that this has fallen during Lent—if it is coincidental, wow. What perfect timing.

The thing to remember, though, as soon as the experts say, “All right, go back to life as normal”—maybe we might *not* return to life as normal. Maybe we can learn these lessons from this intentional time of slowing down and might carry some of these new patterns we might develop through this time into life as we know it once we get on the other side of this. And of course, through it all, it’s prayer, talking with God like you do with a friend.