**Trinity United Methodist Church**

**April 26, 2020**

**Pastor Dan Elmore**

**Prayer**

May we who are merely inconvenienced remember those whose lives are at stake. May we who have no risk factors remember those most vulnerable. May we who have the luxury of working from home remember those who must choose between preserving their health or making their rent. May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools close remember those who have no options. May we who have to cancel our trips remember those that have no safe place to go. May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the economic market remember those who have no margin at all. May we who settle in for quarantine at home remember those who have no home. As fear grips our country, let us choose love. During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each other, let us yet find ways to be the loving embrace of God to our neighbors. These things we pray in the name of Christ, who taught us to pray:

Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

**Scripture: Matthew 6:25-34 (NIV)**

25 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? 28 “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. 29 Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you-you of little faith? 31 So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. 33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

**Sermon**

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

Unless you’ve been living under a rock for quite some time, which you might have, you’ve most likely heard the song, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy,” a song by Bobby McFerrin that is quite the classic now. It is, indeed, a fun song with great sentiment, that we wish we could all follow at any given time. If you think about it, it’s such a fun song, we hear it in typically fun places, like at the beach or maybe in a restaurant or other places where we’re already having a good time. So if life is good and we don’t have a care in the world, then sure, yeah, don’t worry, be happy. But if life isn’t so good and we do have more than a few cares in our lives, it’s a lot easier said than done, isn’t it?

We’re in the second week of a new series on anxiety—what is it and what might be our Christian response to it in our lives, especially as we live during these anxious times? Again, I had discerned to do this sermon series well before all of this pandemic hit, but my, how timely it is.

What is anxiety? That is the question that we talked about last week. If you might remember, anxiety is a rather nebulous term that covers a good deal of psychological ground. As with most things, anxiety exists on a spectrum, where on the normal end of things, we experience anxiety like before taking a major test or maybe before going for a job interview or some such situation. But, the other end of that spectrum is where we experience *constant* anxiety that keeps us internally paralyzed for whatever reason. And it’s particularly that kind of anxiety that we’re talking about more so in this sermon series. And the statistics bear out that even well before this pandemic hit, the number of cases of severe anxiety were greatly on the rise in our country and in other developed countries around the world, because of the untold number of pressures that we face in normal life. Of course, we’re all dealing with it in perhaps more pronounced ways and maybe even different ways than before now that we’re all under safe-at-home orders during this situation.

We talked last week about anxiety being the result of finding ourselves in an empty space. For those of us who are people of Christian faith, that empty space is in particular between us and God. Between that which we know and that which we don’t know. Between that which we know and that which is not meant for us to know, because God is God and we are not.

A colleague, Chad Brooks, who wrote a sermon series on anxiety from which I borrow, says that anxiety is the primary emotion that we experience as a result of sin. *Anxiety is the primary emotion that we experience as a result of sin.* Now, that does not mean that having anxiety makes us sinful, that having anxiety makes us bad somehow. That is not what we’re saying. What it means is that anxiety is part of the human condition with which we live because of this empty space between us and God, and as such, anxiety shows up in our broken world in some pretty broken places. That space is created by sin, but is ultimately filled in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, who has bridged that gap between us and God yet again.

Chad says that every single space in this world, every single space within our lives, is designed to be filled with the presence of God. Indeed, because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we celebrate that even death cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus—so Paul tells us in Romans. Even the space of death, that empty void of death, is now filled with the presence of God because of the resurrection of Jesus. However, God never forces Himself into these empty spaces in our lives. He gives us free will. And the question is, will we let God in or not? This is all complicated by the factor of the adversary, the adversary that is common to us all. You might call him Satan, you might call him the devil, evil—whatever the case might be. Our adversary works to distract us and keep us from letting God fill every space in our lives. This adversary gets us asking the “what-ifs,” like he asked Eve in the garden long ago. *What if* we might be more like God?

Typically we ask that question in negative ways, focusing on negative results. *What if I lose my job,* we might ask ourselves during this time. *What if I get sick? What if the economy never recovers? What if this all never ends?* Before this pandemic hit, we might have asked questions like, *What if they get mad?*, thinking about how someone else might perceive us. *What if I get turned down? What if I/we fail?* It’s easy to get caught up in “what-ifs,” especially during time of change. The bigger the change sometimes, the greater the what-ifs. I experience this every time that we have moved as a clergy family in the United Methodist Church. *What if the new people don’t like me? What if the kids don’t take well to the schools there?* And so forth and so on.

But if we stop and think about it, what is another name for asking those “what-ifs?” For getting caught up in the “what-ifs?” What’s another name for that, especially asking them in a negative way? The name for that is worry, and it goes hand in hand with anxiety. Worry is that which causes us to live far off into the future and keeps us from living in the present fully. But also, worry is different from anxiety. Jesus, in the garden as he prayed, which we looked at last week—He had a lot more going on than just mere worry. However, worry is indeed a part of life. We’ve all got some pretty big things about life that bug us, especially these days. And yet, worry is often what makes us so anxious.

Chad points out that when we worry, we’re actually worshipping our problems. That space in our heart and our mind and our emotions that we should be giving to God, we instead give to whatever it is that we worry about. As we turn to what the Bible has to say about worry, we might ask: Who or what are we trusting to keep us safe and strong and able? *Who or what are we trusting to keep us safe and strong and able to keep on keeping on?* Is it our money? Is it our health? Our status? Our success? Maybe something else.

In the gospel lesson for today from the Sermon on the Mount—The Sermon on the Mount is the context in which we find Jesus’ teaching about worry. And he point-blank says, “Don’t do it.” Is not life more than food and the body more than clothes? Isn’t life more than money, health, status, success, and all the other things that we worry about? Chad says that what we worry about—that what we *care* so much about—is ultimately what we *fall toward,* and we *hope* that it catches us. That’s why when we worry, we’re really worshipping our problems, because we’re trusting in our problems to save us, as twisted as that sounds. We’re giving our problems that space in our minds and hearts and emotions that we *should* be entrusting to God. *Don’t do it,* Jesus says.

1 Peter chapter 5, verse 7 is a great verse that you can work on memorizing at home, especially with your families. 1 Peter chapter 5, verse 7 says: “Give all your worries and cares to God, for He cares about you.” *Give all your worries and cares to God, for He cares about you.* In other words, when we’re going to fall, fall towards God, because God will *always* catch us. Again, though, like the Bobby McFerrin song, it’s easier said than done, right?

Part of the rub is that we’re designed to worry to a degree. Just as normal anxiety is a good thing, worry is part of that. It’s part of that fight-or-flight response that helps us survive. We’re wired with these hormones of cortisol and adrenaline. These hormones that surge within us in response to stress, that give us superhuman strength. You hear of mothers lifting cars off of their children when they’ve had an accident or something such as that, and you think, “how in the world could somebody do that sort of thing?” And it’s because of that surge of adrenaline and cortisol going through their bodies for that specific moment.

The problem is when we think that we’re in crisis all the time. When that cortisol flows constantly, at least more than it should. And our bodies are also wired with two different pathways that help us respond to stress. One is like the gas pedal, giving us that surge of hormones that we need in that moment, and then the other is like the brake pedal that helps us back off when the threat has passed. Well, imagine that you’re driving down the road in your vehicle, pressing both at the same time. Driving with your foot on the brake. Your engine is going to be revving like crazy and you’ll smell the brakes burning, and you know something is wrong. That if you keep it up for more than just a moment, something bad is going to happen to your vehicle. Maybe even irreversible damage is going to happen to your vehicle.

Well, friends, it’s the same in our bodies when we experience constant stress, especially that which is brought on by worry and anxiety. So Jesus points out this foolish way of living. In verse 27 he asks, “Can all of your worries add a single moment to your life?” Since we understand the body’s response to worry, we can see the other side of Jesus’ question here, that which He’s not asking, but maybe He implies: “Do you realize that worry can actually take moments *away* from your life?” At least by making us unable to enjoy certain moments, not outright affecting our physical health. And so he frames this double-sided question with observations. He says, “Look at the birds! They don’t plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your Heavenly Father feeds them. And aren’t you far more valuable to Him than they are?” In verse 28: “And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don’t work or make their clothing. Yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God so wonderfully cares for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, He will certainly take care of you.”

Friends, those empty spaces in our minds and hearts and emotions can so easily be filled with all kinds of lies by Satan. But no matter how full those empty spaces have become with those lies, you can begin right now replacing them with this one simple, enormous truth: **God cares for you.** God so loved the world, God so loved *you*, that He sent His only Son, so that when we believe in Him, He fills those empty spaces with Himself, with the Holy Spirit, so that we might even now, even in the midst of all this uncertainty with which we live, even in the face of all the fear, anxiety and worry that this world could ever throw at us, even and especially now, when we allow Jesus to fill those empty spaces in our lives, we can have everlasting and abundant life, starting now.

How can we give these empty spaces in our lives over to God? How can we start living that everlasting and abundant and worry-free life now? Well, did you notice that today’s scripture reading includes our theme verse for the year? Matthew 6:33—and I like the way the New Living Translation says it: **“Seek the kingdom of God above all else and live righteously, and He will give you everything you need.”**

If you go back and listen to some of those sermons where I’ve been breaking down our theme verse, to “seek the kingdom” is to live with singleness of purpose. Don’t let these other worries and things drag us down. No matter what, *seek the kingdom first, above all else.*

Chad points out a lesson from the recovery community, like AA and NA and groups like that. That when they get overwhelmed by the pressures from day to day, one of the things that they are taught to do is to just simply *do the next right thing for today.* So when you’re overwhelmed and you don’t know which end is up, just figure out what is *the next right thing to do for right now, for today.* Jesus said, “tomorrow has enough troubles of its own. Just focus on today.”

How can we give these spaces in our lives over to God? By seeking the kingdom above all else. But also, it should be no surprise to you what I’m about to say next: Through our spiritual disciplines as well. Particularly two: Prayer and journaling.

Now, when we talk about these sort of mental health matters, it can be problematic sometimes, and I don’t want to come across as saying that “you just need to pray about it more,” or “you just need to pray about it harder.” Because oftentimes we might tell that to somebody who’s really struggling, and it’s not as helpful as we think it might be. In fact, it could be rather harmful. I’ve known many people of faith that have prayed and prayed and prayed and seemingly gotten no answer, and to simply be told, “You’ve got to pray harder”—that one hurts.

Sometimes, remember, there is no shame in seeking professional help. Just as we might have chest pain and go to a regular doctor and find out maybe something’s going on with our heart, so it is with our spiritual heart, emotional heart and mental health as well, to go and seek professional help. Maybe you might need some medication to get over this current crisis, to get through and over this hump which we now face. On the other side you may be able to come off that medication with a doctor’s help and may be able to be without from that point on. There’s no shame in any of that, to do what we need to do with professional help to be healthy and whole.

But back to prayer. It might not be a matter of just simply praying harder about it, but it might be that we might consider shifting our prayers, from asking God to take our problems away, and instead to remember that prayer of Jesus that we looked at last week, where Jesus basically prayed, “God, you might not take this away, but you can give me strength to help me get through this.” Maybe it’s shifting our prayers more to a type of centering prayer. In centering prayer, we speak words a lot less and we leave empty space open to be able to hear from God. And it’s often helpful in centering prayer to have just a very short phrase that we might repeat that re-centers us on the presence of God with us. For the purposes which we’re talking about today, we might use that phrase, “I am loved by God.” To find a quiet space to sit, to be aware of our breathing, to open ourselves to the Lord’s presence and to just say, “I am loved by God.” Then when we find ourselves distracted by, “Oh yeah, I’ve got to take care of this today,” and “oh yeah, we’ve got to call so-and-so today,” and “oh yeah, I’ve got that FaceTime thing at this time with work,” and whatever else—you let that go and say that phrase again to re-center ourselves: **“I am loved by God.”** And we use that to hear what God might be saying even further to us.

Again, like last week, we might pray as Jesus prayed in the garden: “God, you might not take this away from me, but you can make me stronger to get through it.” Because remember, friends, God’s presence is sufficient, no matter what. And above all, prayer helps us tune in to it.

The second spiritual discipline that you might consider picking up this week is journaling. Particularly to do what is often called just a Gratitude Journal, just jotting down things for which you are thankful, putting it into writing. Many of our more mature saints might know the old song, “Count Your Many Blessings, count them one by one.” It's an old tune, it’s a simple tune, but it’s a tune that carries a lot of truth, for that’s how we can turn our mindsets around and be able to refocus where we need to be. Write these things down in your journal. Things about which you say, “These are things that I saw You do, God. That only You could have done, God. This is a place in my life where You were completely sufficient.” And friends, this is a great time to begin that practice. Find yourself a good notebook, open up a file on the computer that you’ll keep and save. It can be a time to begin anew, to pick up that journal you might have begun years ago, no matter how long it’s been.

One of the things that I always enjoy, going back and picking my journal back up, is to go back and see the things that I was struggling with back then and to recognize how God delivered me through and God took care of those things over time. I can say, “That’s what You did, God.” And then when I’m struggling with something again, I go back and look and I’m reminded of God’s faithfulness then and I’m reminded of the promise that God will see me through whatever I’m struggling with in the present, as well.

This will be a fantastic gift to give future generations, as they will be able to look back and see how God was sufficient during this time in our lives. And what a gift to give ourselves tomorrow, to look back and remember how God was sufficient today.

Friends, if we trust that God cares for us, whatever we’re going through, and if we trust that God is sufficient for us today, it becomes even easier to trust that God is sufficient for tomorrow and the next day and all the days after that, in every way.

Thanks be to God. Amen.