

Finding Peace in a High-Anxiety World Sunday, 9/3/17

1 Today we begin a new worship series entitled “Antidotes for the Out-of-Control Life.” Have you ever noticed that we’re all wired for different levels of activity and stress in our lives? Some people aren’t happy if they have more than 30 minutes free on their schedule. These are the same people who can’t sit still for a two-hour movie. For others of us, a day without at least 60 minutes of quiet solitude is almost impossible to bear. Wherever you might find yourself along that continuum- perpetual motion machine to hermit- we all reach a point where we’ve had too much.

Way back in 1908, a pair of psychologists, Robert Yerkes and John Dodson, described what we now call the Yerkes-Dodson law. The basic idea is that we all have a certain sweet spot in our stress level that brings out the best in us in terms of our performance. If we have too little stress in our lives we get bored, we don’t pay enough attention to what we’re doing, and we don’t perform well in the tasks of life. That’s the green area on the graph here. If you’ve been living in the green zone and you’re not on vacation or taking a Sabbath rest, you need to get off the couch and start using those gifts God has given you to bless others, for your own sake as well as the people you share this planet with.

On the other side of the curve is burn out, the red zone. We all have the potential to reach a point of stress in our lives when anxiety, panic, and or anger reign supreme and our ability to perform the simplest tasks in life becomes hopelessly impaired. If you’re in the red zone today, then you need to find some help.

Most of us tend to live in the middle zones, no strangers to feeling tired after a long day or week in the yellow zone, occasionally catching a break and resting in the green zone on the weekend or on vacation, but sometimes crossing over into the orange zone, becoming exhausted by the demands life situations and work brings. None of us gets to dictate all the circumstances of our health, our work, or our relationships. In fact, there’s much more to life that we can’t control than we can. Fortunately for us, God’s Word can help us here- not by taking away our stress, but by giving us a spiritual toolkit for managing it.

2 We begin our series this morning with “Finding Peace in a High-Anxiety World.” I love this photograph of a tree growing on the bank of a river. It feels peaceful to me and inviting. I’d like to sit down under the tree for a few hours and gawk at the way the sunlight

is breaking through the clouds. “Blessed is the one...whose delight is in the law of the Lord,” the psalmist wrote.¹ When I think of sitting under this tree, it feels blessed to me, even though I know that sitting around under a tree isn’t really what the psalmist had in mind. Rather, it’s the fruitfulness of the tree- and the fruitfulness of our lives- that’s really in view here. Finding peace in God’s Kingdom is less about finding a solitary place to retreat to and more about developing a rootedness in Christ that allows us to grow and prosper in all seasons, even the anxious ones.

While our Psalm emphasized obedience to God’s law, our New Testament reading emphasizes being centered in Christ, the perfect fulfillment of God’s law. I’m reading from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, the fourth chapter, in the Message paraphrase.

{Read Philippians 4, the Message}.

3 Paul starts this part of his letter by acknowledging something we all know from experience. The paths we take to our goals in life are seldom straight lines. As disciples of Jesus, all manner of things threaten to waylay us as we seek to follow him. How many of you are familiar with the musical, “Into the Woods,” or at least the basic story of Little Red Riding Hood? A wolf convinces Little Red Riding Hood to dawdle in the woods instead of going straight to her grandmother’s house, with ultimately dire consequences.

The wolves that tempt us off the path of following Jesus are many. In the case of the church at Philippi, there was apparently some interpersonal conflict that needed to be worked out, some grudges dropped. Do you have any grudges that you’re holding onto? Holding onto grudges is like walking around the same tree over and over again, wearing a groove into the hillside rather than moving forward on our journey. Paul reminds us that we’re on a mission for Jesus, and we need to stay on track, straight ahead, steady as you go. Do you remember what our mission is? Making fearless, selfless, and hopeful disciples of Jesus for the transformation and healing of the world. It’s hard to do that when you’re stuck in a rut, circling the same tree. So Paul gives us one key to finding peace in this life: iron out your differences with those you’re in conflict with and get back on track.

4 Believe me, I know that’s almost always easier to say than do, so I’m offering you a

¹ Psalm 1:1-2, NIV

familiar tool to help you along the way: the cross. Next week we'll be offering you a small wooden cross as a reminder you can carry with you to come back to the cross of Jesus. Keep it in your pocket, wear it around your neck- it's up to you. As we kick off our new church year next week, let the cross be a reminder to you that the only lasting peace in this life comes through centering our lives in Christ.

This diagram isn't perfect, but it's one way you might consider using to come back to the cross with a fresh appreciation of what the cross means. Instead of "The Obedient Christian," I wish this figure read, "The Peaceful Disciple," but perhaps both can be true. Can you see the cross in the middle of the circle? Just as the name of Christ appears in the center of this figure, you can think of the intersection of the two pieces of the cross as representing Christ living in the center of your life, your home, your family, your work, your recreation...the list could go on and on. Our mission to be Christ-followers for the transformation and healing of the world can be thought of taking place in two main directions: vertically, through our relationship with God, and horizontally, through our relationship with people and creation.

When you look at the top part of the cross, let that be a reminder to be growing in prayer. When you look at the bottom part of the cross, let that be a reminder to be growing in your knowledge and love of God's Word, the Bible. When you look at the right arm of the cross, let that be a reminder to love and serve your brothers and sisters in Christ in Christian fellowship. When you look at the left arm of the cross, let that be a reminder to love and serve your neighbors by sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in both action and word. And just as the four parts of the cross can't hold together without their center, none of the things we pursue in our lives of discipleship have any meaning or real power without being centered in a vital relationship with Jesus. William Wilberforce, the prominent leader of the movement to abolish slavery in England, said this about Christ at the center: "If there is no passionate love for Christ at the center of everything, we will only jingle and jangle our way across the world, merely making a noise as we go."²

5 Unfortunately, all too often our efforts at living our lives like Jesus are short-

² chatna.com/william-wilberforce-quotes/

circuited when we allow our worries to take center stage in our hearts. We all have worries, most of which we carry around as burdens on our hearts, many of which we keep hidden from others. What are the worries you brought with you into the sanctuary this morning? Are you worried about those afflicted people in Texas and Louisiana? Are you worried about that lump or suspicious growth on our skin? Are you worried about being able to pay the electric bill this month? Are you worried about the direction we're headed as a county? There's an inexhaustible list of things to worry about, and the burden of carrying them can weigh us down like 10,000 stones. Paul writes to share the good news that we don't have to carry the weight of worry in our hearts. I love the way Eugene Peterson expresses this thought: "It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life."³ Paul's prescription for displacing worry from your heart is deceptively simple: "Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns."⁴

Remember that diagram with the cross? The next time you catch yourself worrying about something, come back to the cross, letting that top part of the cross remind you to shape those worries into prayers, and then releasing your worries as you release your prayers, both given to the One who is more than capable and willing to carry your burdens.

6 In verse 6, Paul writes, "Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down."⁵ In many Bibles that word is translated as "peace," but I think "wholeness" is better here. Remember that Paul was a Jew, and so the idea of shalom would have been important to him. Shalom is peace, but in the Bible, it's often used in more specific ways, and especially to the condition of living in a right covenantal relationship with God. When we come back to the cross, we find our peace, our wholeness, in the reminder that God sent his son to be born, to leave and teach, and then to die for our sins. When we come back to the cross, we remember that because Christ died on the cross, we can have shalom with God, if only we'll allow Christ to live in the center of our lives.

³ Philippians 4:8, The Message

⁴ Philippians 4:6, Ibid

⁵ Philippians 4:7, Ibid

7 Earlier I asked you to reflect on the worries of your life. But as we close this message I invite you to reflect on all that's right in your life and the world around you. Paul writes, "you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse."⁶ I'll admit, that's not always easy to do. Every device we use to get the daily news is dripping with that's wrong with the world rather than what's right. But we want Christ to live in the center of our lives, so what's one beautiful, true thing that you can think of today, meditate on, and share with someone else? Is it the truth of your love for Jesus, or the love Jesus has for you? How about something noble, like the courage and compassion of all those flood disaster response and relief workers? How about something praiseworthy? For example, instead of complaining about the summer drought, give praise to God for the beautiful fall colors that are already beginning to appear in the trees?

In their 2017 annual survey entitled, "Stress in America: Coping with Change," the American Psychological Association reported that some of the top contributors to the stress level of Americans are the economy, terrorism, health concerns, and gun violence. Each of us could come up with our own list of worries. Seeking God's peace doesn't mean pretending problems don't exist or dropping out of society. God's peace comes to us when we return to the cross and let the living Christ displace our worries at the center of our being. God's peace comes to us when we release our worries through prayer, and when we reach out in fellowship and service to our brothers, sisters, and neighbors. Each of us can be like a fruitful tree, planted by the bank of a river, deeply rooted in the Word of God. Each of us can come back to the cross, over and over again, as often as we need a reminder of who we are and who we are becoming in Christ.

Please pray with me. *God of compassion, lift the burden of our worries from our heavy hearts. Increase our faith, and send us out with compassion and wholeness to minister to the brokenhearted and lost. Amen.*

⁶ Philippians 4:8, Ibid



Buffalo United Methodist Church
...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!



**609 8th Street NW
Buffalo, MN 55313
763-682-3538**

Bill Reinhart, Pastor
pastorbill@buffaloumc.com