

“RELEASING ANXIETY”
A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Belleville, IL
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(transcribed from audio file)

The scripture for today comes from Philippians 4:4-7.

*Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice.
Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand.
Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication
with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.
And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your
hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. NRSV*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Well, last night was the Belleville East prom and I hate prom. I mean, I liked my prom. My prom was awesome. I loved that. That was a good time. I don't like being the parent on prom night. See we have this habit in my household that when our kids are in high school, when they are out and about, whenever they come, at least one of us stays up for whenever they get home. You know. Tries to fake it, like, you know "I was just up late making a sandwich here at 1:30" when you made it home. And it's okay because one of us has it covered. Either Sarah has to stay up or I do. As long as one of us has it, the other can actually go to bed, go to sleep and it will be okay.

When I was growing up, we had that covered pretty well. My mom, well I'm sure she worried about me, but she didn't have to because we had Grandma Julia in the house. My grandparents lived with us during my high school years and so no matter what time I came home, I would get greeted by my grandma. It didn't matter.

Now she wasn't right there at the door waiting. What would happen is, I would come home and then I would go downstairs to where my room was and just a couple of minutes later it would be like tap, tap, tap, tap down the stairs she'd come. "Oh. Oh. What time is it?"

That woman knew what time it was. She had a clock that was as big as God and a half next to her on her nightstand. She knew exactly what time it was, but that's how it always started. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Oh, it's about one o'clock, you know."

"Uh. It's so late. Okay. Did you have a good time?" She didn't care about that.

"Did you have a good time?"

"Yeah. A good time."

"Okay. All right." And then she'd go back up to bed.

It got to a point in later years where I would, out of compassion, I would not go downstairs right away. I would come in and I would just hang out in the kitchen and wait and eventually, tap, tap, tap, "Oh, what time is it?" And we'd go through the whole thing.

This was a routine that had other variations when I was younger. Like in the summertime when I didn't have to get up in the morning, I would stay up real late, watching late night TV. I mean really . . . So I'd be up late and just sitting there in the living room, watching TV and all of a sudden I'd hear the little tap, tap, tap and my grandma would come around the corner and she'd go, "Aw. What time is it?"

And I'd say, "I don't know."

And she goes, "What are you doing?"

And I'm like, "I'm watching TV."

And she goes, "Oh, with all these lights on, what are the neighbors going to think when they look out the window and see this?"

And I would say to her, "Well, that means they're up too, so they're just as messed up as we are."

And she'd go, "Oh" and she'd go back to her room.

The other thing she would do is if I was up late downstairs, I just knew eventually I would hear the tap, tap, tap and she would come down the stairs. “Aw, what time is it?”

“I gotta get you a watch, grandma. How’d you know I was awake?”

She goes, “I couldn’t sleep cause you had the lights on.”

Now this is what I would say, cause this is just the way I was at that age, and still a little bit now. I’m like, “Grandma. I’m in the basement. The lights are on here. There is no way the light left this room, went through the utility room, turned the corner, went up the stairs, around through the kitchen, through our family room, got to the hallway, turned the corner, went into your bedroom, hooked around your dresser and landed on your face.”

To which she would go, “Huh!” Tap, tap, tap.

But no one in the household had to worry because grandma had it covered. Sometimes we think that we’re the ones that have to cover the worry for other people and sometimes that’s the role we end up playing.

We have this scripture passage today which tells us, don’t be anxious about anything. And let me be clear before I go any further. This is not a passage about people who suffer from anxiety disorders. There is real clinical anxiety that happens in people’s lives and it is happening more and more. A third of adults in the U. S. face issues with anxiety and around 50% of those between the ages of 18 and 24 experience serious issues with anxiety. There is a mental health epidemic going on and this needs to be taken very seriously. That’s part of why we wanted to provide those resources for you that were in your worship handout today.

So, what I’m talking about today is not that kind of anxiety. What we’re talking about is that worry, that worry that doesn’t do any good; that worry that’s just something we tend to hold on to in situations where we don’t feel like we have enough control. And the scriptures tell us again and again that we can trust that God will be with us through whatever we face and when we hold in that worry it’s like saying, I’m not so sure about that.

Don’t get me wrong. I don’t think that it’s a matter of like, well if you just release it to God, everything will be fine. We’re not selling a fairytale story here. We all know that bad things happen. Even when you pray about them, they don’t always go the

way you pray for, and they don't always go down good paths. But the promises of scripture are not that we walk through dark valleys, and we don't occasionally encounter things, but it promises that we won't be alone.

In the scripture passage today, it says that the Lord is near. The presence of the Lord is near. The doing of compassion and care for one another that it calls for early in these verses is a call to us to provide that environment where people can feel the presence of God, both in that divine presence but also in the presence of the body of Christ there with people.

Why do we hold on to worry? Why do we like that worry so much? I'm going to confess to you, there have been times where I have specifically found myself holding back from going to prayer on an issue. It's like somehow the worry was going to be more satisfying and more fulfilling than what the prayer would be. We hold on to worry and why do we do that? There's actually been a lot of studies about this and what they found is that we hold on to worry because it gives us the sense of doing something.

It gives us a sense of control over the situation. The idea of just releasing it, of acknowledging that we don't have full control, of acknowledging that the world is a place where unexpected things happen. Sometimes there are mysteries. Sometimes there are unknowns and uncertainties. That's something we don't want to embrace. Instead, we want to be able to identify the cause and effect if everything goes wrong in this world and maybe if I worry about it enough, I'll figure it out. I'll come up with the right master plan that will solve the entire situation.

But worry doesn't do that. Instead worry just drains us to the point where sometimes we don't even take action because we've used up all our energy simply on worry.

There was this Dutch Christian who was persecuted during the Holocaust, Corrie ten Boom, and what she said were these words. *Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow. It empties today of its strength.* It takes away what you have to give to a situation today. It doesn't really change the future.

And so again and again in scripture we are told to take these words that are upon us and release them. Give them to God. Lift them up to God in prayer. Let God know what it is that is weighing upon you.

Sometimes it's hard to let go of it, isn't it? Sometimes the situation just feels . . . somewhere in our brain we think this is going to work if we just worry it out enough.

It's not that we think we are going to accomplish something, we just can't let go of it.

And I would love to be able to preach a sermon that is so inspiring that every single one of you walks out of here today and goes, "Well, next time I'm going to worry, I'm going to do what the preacher said and just give it up to the Lord. I won't let it weigh upon my heart anymore. Thank you, Jesus, for sending that blessed preacher to send me on the right path." I don't think that's going to work at least 100% of the time, so what I want to lift up to you is this.

How do you practically handle worry as a person of faith? What can we all do? I think that if we can't get to the point where we truly can in our heart and soul release it up to God, then we at least find someone that we know and cares about us, especially someone who cares about us in the faith, and share it with them. Speak with them. You have pastors who care about you. You have Deacons who care about you. There are other people here who would gladly give of their time and their energy to walk alongside you. We don't need to carry worry alone.

Now I believe that God has given us the body of Christ, given us one another so that we can be reminders that God is also near. To feel that presence. Sometimes when you speak it into words and you share it with someone else, you start to realize this is something I can let go of in this moment. And if you have one of those really good friends of faith, they might even suggest that you pray together about it. And that's a lovely thing to do too.

The worry that we have also comes from an idea that we are just not comfortable with these mysteries in life. Developing a deep spiritual life is a way to kind of prepare yourself for those times of worry and dread and anxious moments, because filling your life with an awareness and maturity of your faith gets you to the point where you realize it is not all figured out. A mature faith understands that the world is filled with mysteries and gray areas and things that we cannot comprehend and things we certainly cannot control.

And yet we walk through those valleys with faith. Faith that we will not be left alone in those valleys. And when we prepare our hearts and minds as people of faith, continually through worship and prayer, engagement with the word of God, living this Christian life together, it builds up that resilience; it builds up that knowledge; it builds up that wisdom that says, I know I'm not alone.

I understand this world is not under my control and I can live a life where I can let go sometimes, because I trust in the presence of God in my life. Not because everything is going to go great or the way I want it, but simply because I trust in the presence of God in this life.

That's the peace that we have, but you say, "I don't understand" and that's why the scripture said that you will *have the peace that surpasses all understanding*. That peace is faith. It's beyond your understanding. It's beyond your control. It's in the hands of the Savior who loves you.

May God be glorified by the way you find the strength to let go.

Halleluiah and Amen.