

**Message: Anxious? Seek God****Have you ever heard of "free floating anxiety"?**<sup>1</sup>

Gil Rendle writes about it in his monograph, "A Call to Quiet Courage." "The idea is this: when threatened, organizations, families and people, are driven by anxiety. We all have concerns. We may worry about our job, the cost of living, our relationships, our children, the direction our country is going and what the future will hold for any of us. Those concerns are normal.

**We're all living under stress.** Stress may come from a concern for our job: industries once strong in the United States have changed and outsourced jobs in the global market. Perhaps the work we used to do has changed from production to information, requiring new skills, training and new occupations. Decision-making has changed, with shifts in political, social and economic direction. Stress is real, ongoing and it impacts our lives in a dynamic way.

**What it means is this: we're uncertain about what to expect in most areas of our lives.** The world is changing rapidly and we have strong differences over how to deal with our problems. That's why Ed Friedman, a counselor who works with families, says we live in a culture of free floating anxiety. We don't know what the future will bring. The organizations we've relied on, including the church, are either failing outright or don't seem to have answers for the problems we're facing.

**The problem with high anxiety is that it invites people to become reactive, to herd together for safety, to blame others for their anxiousness, to seek quick fixes and to sabotage leaders.** At it's worst, over-attention to stress and discomfort invites us to focus our decisions and resources on our weaknesses, rather than our strengths. We focus on our pain and suffering, rather than the way forward."<sup>2</sup>

**When we lose sight of our purpose and intent, we lose our sense of direction.** We feel powerless. We tend to regress, to force conformity, no matter whether we're talking about health, education, oversight or social justice. We focus on comfort. We want to avoid anything that

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<sup>1</sup> Gil Rendle, *A Call to Quiet Courage*, August 2016

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* (modified)

causes pain, even the changes that lead to health. We lose sight our purpose and the role we have to play in making things better.

**What can we do about our anxiety? What hope do we have?**

**What role do faith and the church have?** The Bible passage we read together from Matthew 6:24-34 speaks directly to these challenges.

It's part of Jesus' most famous message, the Sermon on the Mount.

It carries a timely message. Jesus gives us a big clue saying, "*Therefore, do not worry...*" TWICE (vv25 & 31)!!

Prior to this passage, Jesus teaches about prayer, fasting, that true treasures are found in our heart – not our pocket, and that we can choose to fill ourselves with light or darkness by what we pay attention to. He reminds us money isn't the answer (v24). These proverbial lessons all point back to 5:48, "*Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" The Greek word for "perfect" also means "reaching the end," "complete in all parts," or "fully grown" in spiritual maturity. It implies that our character lacks nothing when we're living as the image of Christ.

**That's a powerful image!** It gives us hope. There is a way. Yet Jesus ends his teaching by telling us "*do not worry.*" What's up? God in human flesh, Jesus is divine and human at the same time. His human nature is the same as ours: we want to worry. He's recognizing we have daily needs for nourishment and care. Then he reminds us we're made to be in relationship with God and people to be healthy. But the very things God gives to us to care for us, we worry over.

**Jesus uses three examples very familiar to people: food, drink and clothing.** We have the same needs today, but they're particularly important to the people of Jesus' time. The society was agrarian: most people either lived on a farm or they depended on farmers for their livelihood. People lived from hand to mouth. If you didn't grow food, you didn't eat. If you didn't trade with farmers, raise livestock or have a valuable craft, you didn't eat.

**What are our modern day needs? Name a few out loud**

Some might say shelter, work, transportation, internet, entertainment, caregivers, doctors or medicines. All of these are real, but God calls us to have a different view.

**Jesus shifts our perspective to from physical concerns to the spiritual**, saying *"life is more than food, the body more than clothing"* (v25). He points out that people who don't know God have the same concerns we do. The difference: we have hope. Jesus reminds us that the God who made the universe, who made you and me, the same God who knows the number of hairs on your head, knows all our needs, no matter what they are (v32)! This is a message of assurance. God will care for us. Even though we may not get what we want, God will provide what we need. God loves you and cares for you.

**Have any of you ever experienced God's care in this way?** I have. In 2003, I lost my job and was unemployed for two years. I ran out of savings, unemployment ended and I still had no means to live. It was incredibly difficult, painful and a great lesson in pride, but God cared for me. I always had what I needed. God also changed the direction of my life. Without that experience, I would not be here today as your pastor.

**What Jesus teaches is the way to well-being:** *"Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well"* (v33). In other words, seek to be in a good relationship God and your needs will be met. Knowing and loving God is a higher and greater purpose that all of the stress and worry the world imposes on us. This is our purpose at all times, even when the troubles of today want to distract us. Jesus isn't telling us to ignore our problems. He's telling us the way to overcome our troubles is to see them as opportunities for seeking God. That isn't a promise of physical security but of spiritual renewal and care.

**God is present everywhere; all the time.** God is with us during the high points of our lives: childhood, baptism, marriage, birth of our children, successes and the good times. Jesus, God with us, is also there for us during the low points of our lives: illness or disease, infirmity, depression, death, failure, addiction and the bad times.

**Luke 16 tells about a time when God was there for Paul and Silas on a really bad day.** After being followed and heckled by a young woman one day, Paul healed her, to the displeasure of her master. The man raised a crowd and got the local judges on their side. After attacking Paul and Silas, they stripped them, beat them with rods and then gave

the two men a severe flogging. Paul and Silas were taken to the deepest part of the prison and their feet fastened into stocks by chains. No food, no water, no care.

**How did Paul and Silas respond?** Acts 16:25 tells us, "*About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.*" I'm not sure I could do that, could you? After being falsely accused of a crime, abused, publically humiliated and thrown in jail, most of us would be feeling pretty sorry for ourselves. Paul and Silas had a different frame of mind. They saw an opportunity to worship God and to share with those who were suffering the same fate.

**What happened next is miraculous!** Acts 16:26 tells us there was a violent earthquake. The ground shook so much that the prison's foundation was affected: all the prison doors opened and the chains binding the prisoners to the stocks unfastened. Of course, the shaking woke the jailer up. When he saw the doors open, he feared the worst. If the prisoners escaped, the jailer was responsible and the authorities tended to punish not only the person responsible, but their family as well. So he took out his sword to kill himself.

**That's when Paul shouts something incredible:** "*Don't harm yourself, we're all here.*" The jailer brought a light and found Paul, Silas and all of the prisoners still there. He fell down, shaking and said, "*How can I be saved?*" They tell him, "*Believe in the Lord and you and your household will be saved.*" The story ends with the jailer, his family and servants baptized. The jailer cares for Paul and Silas, feeding and tending them. Everyone rejoices in their new faith (vv28-34).

**God may not send an earthquake to free us.** Our prisons aren't just physical, but emotional, mental and spiritual. God will care for us, tending to our spirit first and foremost. Sadly, few of us have the faith or presence of mind to sing praises to God and pray when we're feeling down and out. Yet that's what we're called to do. Paul and Silas rose above their physical needs, seeking God in their desperate situation. Even when they could have run away, they were alert to the opportunity to introduce their oppressors to God's kingdom, a kingdom that runs on love, not hate. That's the kind of faith that's assured and confident.

Paul and Silas didn't know God would free them. They were being true to their faith and love of God. That's faith in action.

**Note: Jesus ends by teaching us to focus on the worries of today (v34).** Don't borrow worries from the future, filling your heart and mind with all of the "what if" scenarios that may come. Planning for the future is good. Worrying about what will come isn't helpful. We're to focus on the present opportunities to develop and grow and to share God's love with others. That's a practical way to live. It's not the life of the mind. It's a full life, "*loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength*" (Mark 12:30). We're called to be true to our faith and care for others in love.

**Why can we feel assured?** Because we know God is big enough to handle all problems. God cares for, and loves, all of us. Jesus knows the troubles and challenges we face, including death. God's Spirit helps freely and willingly, even when we don't know what to pray. I don't know about you, but that gives me courage to hold on, even when there are more questions than answers, even when my faith is weak, even when it seems like the world is against me.

**A modern day parable.** "A young woman went to her mother and told her about her life and how things were so hard for her. She didn't know how she was going to make it and wanted to give up. She was tired of fighting and struggling. It seemed as one problem was solved, a new one arose.

Her mother took her to the kitchen. She filled three pots with water and placed each on the stove. Soon the pots came to boil. In the first she placed carrots, in the second she placed eggs, and in the last she placed ground coffee beans. She let them sit and boil without saying a word.

After about twenty minutes, the mother turned off the burners. She fished the carrots out and placed them in a bowl. She pulled the eggs out and placed them in a bowl. Then she ladled the coffee into a bowl.

Turning to her daughter, she asked, "Tell me what you see."

"Carrots, eggs, and coffee," she replied.

Her mother asked her to feel the carrots. She did and noted that they were soft. The mother then asked the daughter to take an egg and break

it. After pulling off the shell, she saw the hard boiled egg. Finally, the mother asked the daughter to sip the coffee. The daughter smiled as she tasted its rich aroma. She asked, "What does it mean?"

**Her mother explained that each of these objects had faced the same adversity: boiling water.** Each reacted differently. The carrot went in strong, hard, and unrelenting. However, after being subjected to the boiling water, it softened and became weak. The egg had been fragile. Its thin outer shell had protected its liquid interior, but after sitting through the boiling water, its inside became hardened. The ground coffee beans were unique, however. After they were in the boiling water, they had changed the water.

**"Which are you?" she asked. "When adversity knocks on your door, how do you respond? Are you a carrot, egg or a coffee bean?"**

**Ask yourself the question: Which am I?**

Am I the carrot that seems strong, but with pain and adversity do I wilt and become soft and lose my strength?

Am I the egg that starts with a malleable heart, but changes with the heat? Did I have a fluid spirit, but after a death, a breakup, a financial hardship or some other trial, have I become hardened and stiff? Does my shell look the same, but on the inside am I bitter and tough with a stiff spirit and hardened heart?

Or am I like the coffee bean? The bean actually changes the hot water, the very circumstance that brings pain. When the water gets hot, it releases fragrance and flavor. If you're like the coffee bean, when things are at their worst, you get better and change the situation around you.

**How do you handle adversity?** When the hour is the darkest and trials are their greatest, do you elevate yourself to another level by seeking God first and caring for others even when you are in need? Are you a carrot, an egg or a coffee bean?

The happiest of people don't necessarily have the best of everything. They make the most of everything that comes along their way.<sup>3</sup> They let go of past failures and heartaches and turn to Jesus for strength when

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<sup>3</sup> [www.thoughts-about-god.com/fun/carrotcoffee.htm](http://www.thoughts-about-god.com/fun/carrotcoffee.htm)

they’re faced with trials and temptations. It’s the way of peace. It’s the way of those who are mature in spirit, assured of God love.

I pray God’s grace will give you confidence to have courage and hold tight to faith when you are in anxious times. In Jesus Name, amen.

**Psalm 131 (NRSV)**

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time on and forevermore.

**Matthew 6:24-34 (NRSV)**

“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you - you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”