

Homily – Accepting Uncertainty

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Today, in the twenty-first century we want answers. We have come to expect instant answers, and when we don't get them we get angry. The internet puts information at our fingertips, and the twenty-four news cycle leads us to believe the answers are there if we just stay watching. We want instant answers from our politicians, from our doctors, and from God.

And, when we don't get instant answers we seem to do at least three things.

First, we fill the void with a guess at the answer. Because we dislike ambiguity, highly intelligent people fill a void with intelligent guesses, but the problem is that our guesses are often wrong. It seems we prefer to have a wrong answer than no answer at all.

The second thing that we do when we don't have instant answers is to start to fret. We fill the void with worst case scenarios. We don't like uncertainty so we start the cycle of worries. As individuals and even as a community we can build ourselves into quite a state. How many of you remember the story of Chicken Little?

The third thing that we seem to do is get angry at the people who aren't fretting with us. We fear that the non-anxious people are ignoring a serious problem, and they are making it worse. There is a lot of peer pressure to join in the cycle of worries. And, the twenty-four hour news cycle spins it up to an amazing speed.

Anxiety, and fretting, and worrying are obviously not a new thing. Two thousand years ago, in the time of Jesus, there would have been a lot of things to worry about. Like today some of the worrying leads to better safety. Some of the fretting is worth it. And like today some of the worrying is blown out of proportion. Our task is to find the proper balance.

And, the first step is to remember that God has created beauty in each and every one of us. A lot of churches focus on original sin and the fall of humanity. However, like the Orthodox churches I like to instead focus on the original beauty that we have from God. Our real self is made in the image of God, but it

does have some layers of muck including layers of anxiety that can develop around the real self. God desires our authentic self to shine forth, and God's foundational plan and action to help that happen is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And today, I want to focus on the life and teachings of Jesus as depicted through our Gospel reading about Nicodemus.

If any character from the Bible can be regarded as representative of 21st-century America, it might be Nicodemus. In many ways he is a sympathetic character. He is a successful and self-confident man. He plays a leadership role in his community. And, he seems to be spiritually open and curious.

Nicodemus is committed and curious enough that he makes an appointment to talk with Jesus face-to-face. However, Nicodemus is not ready to go public with his interest in Jesus, so he makes the appointment in the middle of the night when he can keep his faith secret. Nicodemus is worried and anxious about what might happen if others find out about his secret. Perhaps the fretting is appropriate or perhaps it is spun out of control. We don't know. But I want to set the stage for you that our story of Nicodemus has an anxious man visiting with Jesus in the middle of the night.

As Jesus sees the anxiety, he does two things to cure Nicodemus.

First, Jesus is a non-anxious presence. There is a lot of good data that shows one of the best things for an organization or community that is spinning out of control with anxiety is to have a leader who is a non-anxious presence. Bishop Mary found this to be true when she started as our Bishop thirteen years ago. And curiously, she found she need to be the non-anxious presence again five year later.

I think it is fair to say that Jesus was a non-anxious presence. Jesus is not a man of fear. He is the opposite. And, his calm demeanor would have been infectious. Jesus is a non-anxious teacher who helps to calm Nicodemus, and by extension he can alleviate our fears as well

And then in today's reading, Jesus does something unexpected to calm the anxiety of Nicodemus. Many of us would try to calm fears by showing the worry is baseless. We would try to show there is nothing wrong. We would try to show that things are going to be OK.

But Jesus does something else. He answers the questions of Nicodemus and tells him some things that make no sense.

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Huh?

And, Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? ... Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.... The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

Again, Huh?

In today’s Gospel reading we have a series of answers and statements from Jesus that seem to make no sense. Over the centuries, very good minds have come up with explanations, but two thousand years ago, the answers from Jesus would have been nonsense to Nicodemus. The idea of rebirth and going back into the womb. It is ridiculous, and Jesus would have known this. For you see, Jesus’ answers are meant to shock Nicodemus out of answers that he can understand.

And, instead of scolding Nicodemus for his lack of understanding, I think of Jesus is teasing him. *Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?*

Nicodemus is a teacher of Israel. And, he is supposed to be a pretty good one. So, I think Jesus is reminding Nicodemus that even the brightest people don’t know all the answers to things. Through this story we see that Jesus is telling Nicodemus that it is OK to not understand.

And, this gives us room to also not understand. We are like Nicodemus. There are many things in life that we will never understand. There are things that we will only understand in fullness when we see God face-to-face. Instead of fretting when we don’t get answers, we can laugh at our own efforts and then get up and try again.

We can allow all of our unanswered questions to be answered by God's grace and in God's time. We can let go of our need for dualistic answers and let God work in ways we don't have to understand or control. We can look for answers with our hearts instead of our minds. We can live life fully by leaning into the unknown and letting go of our demands for answers. Fear and anxiety can have less of a role in our lives. As I said earlier, God created us with a lot of beauty, and we can unwrap that beauty when we shed our unhelpful propensity to ceaseless worry.

Jesus is helping Nicodemus let go of his anxieties and worries by reminding him to let go of his need for answers.

Now, in no way am I blaming the sufferers of anxiety for their pain. Nor, do I mean to dismiss the pain of those who suffer from anxiety. I don't take anxiety lightly. Sometimes when confronted with airplane travel, my husband, Jeff, suffers from panic attacks. My daughter, Katie, has been having anxiety about her new baby and things that could go wrong with her son. And, my mother, Sue, was taking anxiety medication during the last year of my dad's life to mask her dread about his poor health. Like many of you, some of those I love most are struggling with anxiety.

And from their experience, I can see that medication and counseling are wonderful treatments for anxiety. Exercise and physical activity are good too.

And, there are spiritual practices we can undertake to come alongside these other treatments to help alleviate some of the endless worrying that can take over our minds.

You have heard me say before that I believe the three parts of self are body, mind, and spirit. I believe that body, mind, and spirit all impact one another. If your physical health is dragging, then it can dampen your mental or spiritual health. Conversely, if your mental health is doing well, then it can help lift up your physical health. I believe that anxiety needs to be offset by treatments that focus on the physical and the mental parts of self. And, I also believe there are spiritual practices that can help us with the anxiety of a world that seem to be spinning out of control.

Being around people who are a non-anxious presence is a great boost to the spirit. Letting go of the need for answers and the control that comes with answer. This is another good spiritual practice. And, last week in our Thursday night Lenten series, some in the group came up with other spiritual practices that are good at helping with anxiety.

The practice of Trust.

Meditation in all its forms like centering prayer, breathing prayer, and contemplative prayer.

Being in community with other followers of Jesus.

The practice of compassion – compassion for those who are sick, and compassion for those that are scared.

The practice of control of the tongue. Is your anxiety causing higher anxiety in others.

And the spiritual practice of detachment. Letting go of the need to control the outcome. Letting God be in charge. And again, giving up on the demand for answers.

As followers of Jesus I pray that we can be a non-anxious presence in a world that sorely needs us. We too can learn the lesson that Jesus is teaching Nicodemus which is to accept ambiguity, to give up the demand for black and white answers, and to embrace a nondual way of thinking.

During this time of uncertainty around the new coronavirus, doesn't this seem like something we need to do. As followers of Jesus we need to manage our anxiety and not have it manage us.

That said we are also taking prudent actions here at St. Barnabas to increase our hygiene during Sunday morning worship.

First, if you feel that you have come down with something, then I want to remind you to stay home. Call us if you need help or would like prayers. Keep your church in the loop, but stay home. And on the other side, if you are at higher risk due to pre-existing heart or lung issues, then make sure you are also

extra safe. And, keep you church in the loop if you are staying at home because of higher risk.

Second, I encourage you to do a holy bow to one another rather than shaking hands or hugging. The holy bow may be when we greet each other before or after the service, and during the sharing of the peace.

Third, we will not be passing the offering plate. Instead, the plates will be on the tables there in the back. You may put your donation in the plate before the service, during the service, or after the service.

Fourth, we will not be sharing the wine during the Eucharist. Like many, the Episcopal Church believes that Communion with one element is perfectly sufficient. In this time of uncertainty and during this flu season I will be blessing wine on the altar. But we are not sharing the common cup.

And, you can be assured that those of us that are touching the bread are washing our hands and using hand sanitizer.

Finally, last week we purchased a subscription to the Zoom video conferencing service that will allow one hundred of us at a time to use our devices or land lines to be together in meetings and even in worship. If things getting weirder than they already are, then we can worship virtually. In the meanwhile, you can also use Zoom for your meetings. Call Carole in the office, and she can give you instructions.

As of this morning we are still at low risk here in San Luis Obispo County. There are no known cases of the new coronavirus, though the flu is rampant.

We want to be safe. We want to be prudent. We want to be a non-anxious presence in the South County. With this lower anxiety we can better see the beauty that is already in us and in the people around us. Be prepared and let go of your demands.

And maybe even take a break from the twenty-four hour news cycle.