

Whatever, Part 3

Message #3 in the series, "Whatever"

Philippians 4:6-9

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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"Post-Pandemic Stress Disorder." Yes, that's now a thing! And, like everything else, it has an abbreviation: PPSD. Now, whenever you describe a new disorder, you run the risk of causing what some have called 'Student Nurse Syndrome' by mentioning it. This is a common phenomenon encountered among first-year nursing students when they first learn of new ailments. As they study the contributing symptoms, they detect a few in themselves and then, they mistakenly diagnose themselves as having the ailment. This is more 'diagnosis by suggestion' than anything else. Its unfounded suspicions based simply on academic exposure not actual exposure!

Now, of course there's always *that* danger – we're all susceptible to suggestion. But there's also the *relief* that comes from hearing a description that describes exactly where you're at. Relief comes as you realize that, first: 'I'm not the only one'; and secondly, 'it's not just in my mind. It's a real thing!'

Let's admit it: everyone has been exposed to incredible anxiety-provoking stressors over the past year (not equally, mind you, but none of us has been immune). And, while the thought of gathering with family and friends again, or of traveling and getting back to activities we've sorely missed, many of us are somewhat surprised to find that we also feel stressed and anxious about the "return to normal."

We must realize that we're going to be dealing with long-term consequences of the pandemic. The **acute** phase may be over, but we're going to be working through the **chronic** consequences for a while. **Experiencing mixed reactions as we transition back is to be expected.** So, don't be hard on yourself – and, if you're experiencing anxiety levels unusual for yourself, understand it's normal – and be patient with yourself and with those around you who are acting not-quite-themselves – we've dealt with a not-quite-the-world we were used to.

Our emotions have been put to the test, and very possibly over-loaded for an extended period of time. That takes its toll. We might find that we can't just shut them down as easily as before. We might find that our emotions are still on high alert; they're triggered easily and they're just not calmed by reasoning as they typically were in the past.

The very same caution and concern that served us well the past year rush to the surface in knee-jerk fashion even now (when unnecessary). As others around us are eager to return to the emotional calm they once enjoyed, we find our inner mechanisms still wound tightly.

Those of us who are Gung-Ho to get back to normal? Maybe we need to exercise our underdeveloped 'patience' muscles a bit. There are many who aren't eager nor ready to line-up behind you who can't wait to cannonball back into normalcy.

You might not worry about getting back to normal – but now you have the added worry of convincing your mate to loosen their grip! Your worries and anxieties end up being more of the interpersonal type.

The apostle Paul provides us with an antidote for addressing internal, interpersonal and external stressors in the passage we've been looking at over the past three weeks. Let me read our passage in full. It's taken from Paul's letter to the Philippians church, chapter 4, verses 6 through 9:

⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.
(Philippians 4:6-9)

We know from hints in the New Testament letters themselves and from corroborating historical accounts that the first-century church experienced stressors from a variety of angles. So often this new and misunderstood movement was the scapegoat for whatever went wrong in Roman society, and often suffered mistreatment and even physical oppression and persecution at the hands of employers, neighbors and even government authorities. In this concluding section of the letter, Paul maps out an approach that addresses all of us who live in stressful times.

His opening line: ***"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything..."*** reminds us of this simple reality:

EVERYTHING IS A POTENTIAL WORRY

I grew up in an Italian, Roman-Catholic family which also had Jewish roots. So, as you might guess, I was doomed from birth to be a expert worrier. Anxiety, or worry, as Pastor David defined it for us, is "a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome." In other words, it's a feeling of worry, nervousness or unease about

something that we have no control over. If it exists, it qualifies for worry. Because, in reality, we don't control anything. Control is an illusion.

Basically, if you can think it, notice it, or anticipate it - you can worry about it. It can be real or imagined. It can be as subtle as a perceived facial expression or as blatant as a yelled, profanity-laced, threat!

Worry is generated and perpetuated by self-talk. If you are a worrier, are you aware of the inner monologue that occurs in your brain as you discuss the ins-and-outs of a situation? I'm convinced that worry is generated by our inner monologues. I realized one day that there is an endless monologue that goes on in my head. Especially, as I try to figure out how to solve or control a situation. Now, before you start questioning my sanity, or write in your sermon notes, "John's doctor needs to up his meds or strap him into a bed," know that there are many others who admit to hearing voices, too. Walt Whitman famously said, "Do I contradict myself? Very well, I do, I am large, I contain multitudes."

But here is the good news.

EVERY WORRY IS A POTENTIAL PRAYER

One of the simplest conversions is taking your inner monologue and addressing it to Someone else besides yourself. Worry becomes prayer when - you reroute your inner monologue to God. Now, that's easier said than done. You're going to have to concentrate on directing them away from yourself and to the ever-present other One. When you've habitually conversed within yourself, you're going to find yourself repeatedly interrupting and intruding when you try to involve another conversation partner!

Here's a test whether you are successful or not in turning your worries into prayer. When you pray, do you leave the time in prayer relieved or more burdened than before? This reveals whether you are actually praying to God or talking to yourself. Hear me out on this next line: as a Christian believer you have more "to worry about" than non-believers. There are simply more things that matter and there are more things at stake. You simply don't concern yourself with the afterlife if you don't believe in one, right? When you care about the things of God, there are more things that concern you in life. The apostle Peter encourages us to *'Cast your cares/anxieties upon Him for He cares for you'* (1 Peter 5:7). When I pray I try to picture my burden as a physical weight that I am actually lifting off of my shoulders and placing into God's lap. That mental image helps me considering my prayer as actually transferring something off my heart (or off my shoulders) and placing into God's keeping. I'm not just talking to myself; I'm speaking to someone and allowing them to carry the burden and take care of the situation. It's a tangible picture to help me appreciate what is taking place as I pray.

This picture of transferring worries, struggles, burdens from me to God leads to the third aspect - yet crucial aspect - of prayer that Paul talks about in our passage:

PRAYER PROVIDES POTENTIAL PEACE

⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Paul's instruction is worded in an interesting way. What does the addition of "with thanksgiving" mean? Does this mean praying with such faith and confidence that you thank God beforehand for the answer? No, I don't think so.

Sometimes prayer is portrayed as a formula that if we only get it right, we are assured our desired results. Bring the proper amount of faith, tag on the right words at the end, "in Jesus' name" like a signature, and hold God to his promise that if we ask anything in his name he'll grant it. But prayer is not a formulaic computer enterprise, it's interacting with our loving, Heavenly Father. He's not an impersonal celestial bellhop hopping to attention each time we ring. God cares way too much for us than to cater to our every whim, to indulge our every desire. His intentions for us are so much bigger than to keep us happy, he's aiming to make us look like him, developing in us the family likeness.

Thanksgiving accompanies our prayers because we're still amazed of the privilege we have to talk to the Lord of the universe, we're thankful for all Jesus did to secure that relationship...

All of our requests are in the context of all that Jesus has done for us. Prayer – which involves us turning worries into requests, reminds us of God's Fatherly love for us. It is all ultimately grounded on the amazing grace of the cross which secured our relationship with God. Prayer is asking our loving Father who proved his love already beyond shadow of a doubt when he gave his Son for us - to show his love in the here in now, in the minutiae of our lives. Because we're reminded of the cross, we're reminded of his love that knows no limits. We pray for what we think we need in light of His knowing what we truly need. That brings a peace to our souls that provides secure standing like nothing else.

You see, the peace of God is not dependent on our circumstances. It's not rattled by the stressors that might prompt anxiety, nor are they dependent on God answering our prayers as we tell him to. Paul mentions peace twice in our passage:

Presenting prayers to God leads to ***the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*** And Paul mentions the very presence of the God of peace at the end of this passage. This Greek word, Eirene is the New Testament equivalent of the key term Shalom from the Hebrew Old Testament. Shalom (one of the few Hebrew words we know, because it is used as a greeting even today), is a key concept which stands for God's intention for harmonious life. God's original intent for the world involved peaceful relationships between God, ourselves, others, our physical environment,

and the animal kingdom. Sin brought fracture to all of those relationships – shame before God, guilt within ourselves, blame between ourselves, selfish exploitation over creation. Jesus’ mission was to bring reconciliation and restoration to all those various relationships. As the Apostle Paul writes elsewhere,

Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have gained access by faith into the grace in which we now stand and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings.... (Romans 5:1-3)

Here is the peace that we are thankful for. Peace, a reconciled relationship with God is what provides the peaceful soundtrack for our lives. It is in prayer, when we rely on our heavenly Father that we find the peace that is unshakable. As Paul says it makes us rejoice in our future destiny (hope of glory), and it revolutionizes how we view difficulties (we rejoice in suffering!). Paul says that this peace protects our hearts. In an almost ironic fashion, Paul uses a militaristic term “guards” – a word used to describe a soldier standing sentry to defend and protect a stronghold or a gate, to describe how PEACE protects our hearts and minds from anxiety which would steal away our faith, trust and peace.

This is illustrated well by the artist, Jane Marcewski, whose original song “It’s OK” became the top song on iTunes after she sang on TV. Ever heard of her? (My guess is that you haven’t). Her story illustrates well how ‘the peace of God transcends comprehension’ – how despite circumstances, there is a calm given by God to those who trust Him.

Jane is 30 years old, from Zanesville, Ohio, and appeared on the TV program *AMERICA’S GOT TALENT* (AGT) on June 8 of this year. She appeared under the stage name, Nightbirde. Before she sang her original song, entitled, “It’s Okay”, she told her story.

In 2017, she was first diagnosed with stage-three breast cancer and given six months to live. In 2018 she was declared cancer-free, only to discover a few months later that the cancer had returned. Her husband of five years left her. She went on alone — winning this second battle in July 2020.

The night she auditioned for *America’s Got Talent*—captivating the audience and judges. Simon Cowell, the British judge known for his begrudging compliments and honest-to-the-point of being rude criticisms, awarded her the golden buzzer which is a prize reserved only for the best of acts and catapults a competitor into the finals. After the song, she revealed her cancer was back and now in her liver, spine, and lungs. Host Terry Crews simply said, “You are the voice we all need to hear this year.”

Her song, speaks of heartbreak, reveals faith amidst mystery, pain and unknowing, and yet repeats this simple chorus:

It's okay, it's okay, it's okay, it's okay
If you're lost, we're all a little lost and it's alright
It's okay, it's okay, it's okay, it's okay
If you're lost, we're all a little lost and it's alright

After the song, she revealed her cancer was back and now in her liver, spine, and lungs.

Although the source of her faith wasn't examined at length on the TV program, she writes an online blog that is full of Scriptural references and Christian faith...for example, one of her entries reads.....

I remind myself that I'm praying to the God who let the Israelites stay lost for decades. They begged to arrive in the Promised Land, but instead he let them wander, answering prayers they didn't pray. For 40 years, their shoes didn't wear out. Fire lit their path each night. Every morning, he sent them mercy bread from heaven. I look hard for the answers to the prayers that I didn't pray.¹

Here is an example of one of our greatest fears, cancer, that more than qualifies as a reason to worry or be anxious (to say the least!). However, what could have very naturally could have fueled fears and worries, have been translated into prayers and an expectant outlook. From that vantage point, an almost logic-defying (=transcending understanding) calm comes through the demeanor and words of this fellow believer.

Today, especially if you are prone to worries.....try to interrupt your inner monologue and address your concerns to your Father (who overhears them indirectly anyway). As you address your concerns to Him, picture yourself physically lifting them off yourself and placing them in God's lap. Be mindful of the temptation to grab them back! Allow yourself the peaceful rest that comes from trusting God. Thank the God who is with you, the God who won peace for you through the cost of His Son, the God who aims to bring you peace, grant you peace in His Son, Our Lord, Jesus Christ.

¹ <https://www.nightbirde.co/blog/blog-post-title-three-2rjnk>