

The Danger of Anxiety

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Text: Matthew 6: 19 – 7: 12

Anxiety. Just saying the word can make us.... well...anxious! Anxiety is akin to the blood in our veins. Everyone has it to some degree, I think, and some more than others. Anxiety can be defined in many ways, but for me, it's worrying about what *might* happen. Anxiety is about control, and many (if not all) of us want some degree of control. Anxiety on its own is not necessarily a bad thing, but it can lead to unfortunate decisions that can cause a lot of harm to ourselves and to one another.

Way back in seminary, we were assigned reading two volumes of Reinhold Niebuhr's book, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. In those books, Niebuhr talked about anxiety leading to one of two outcomes, neither of them good. One was the sin of pride, the other the sin of sloth. It's a lot more dualistic than I think necessary, but I do think he was onto something about how our anxiety can lead us to either overcompensate, or try to control things, or we can just give in and say, "whatever". Neither is a good option. Niebuhr says it this way: In short,

man [sic], being both free and bound, both limited and limitless, is anxious.

Anxiety is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which man is involved.” Niebuhr believed that “anxiety is the internal precondition of sin.” Anxiety is not of itself sinful, but it can lead to sin.

Niebuhr wrote that the only way to find freedom from anxiety it to have “perfect trust in divine security.” That sounds a little like our scripture for this morning: Strive first for the Kingdom of Heaven and all these things will be yours as well. Perfect trust in divine security. We say we have it, but do we?

“For the present it is enough to observe that no life,” says Niebuhr, “even the most saintly, perfectly conforms to the injunction not to be anxious.” He goes on to say that “anxiety about perfection and about insecurity and thus inexorably bound together in human actions...they always exhibit some tendency of the agent to hide his own limits, which he knows only too well.”

In our chapter for today, Brian McLaren picks up where Niebuhr leaves off, in some ways, but he agrees that “Our first core problem is anxiety. Driven by anxiety, we act out scripts of destruction and cruelty rather than life and creativity. We worry about things beyond our control – and in so doing, we often miss things within our control.” Just think about it. Jesus telling us not to worry,

and be not anxious, while perhaps impossible, does offer a freedom to us that no nation, no human person, no human system, can give us. And, to some extent, it seems that it is in our control. While we cannot control outcomes, perhaps we can control our *reaction to* or our *worry about* outcomes. McLaren relates that Jesus names some of the things we get anxious about: our bodies, food, drink, and clothing. I would add our money, our homes, our children, our neighbors...all of these are good to care about, but when we obsess about them, something else happens. [According to McLaren] “Not only are our anxieties ridiculous and counterproductive, Jesus explains, they are also unnecessary.” He points to many things in our world that we have little or no control over that are simply provided by the world God created...the natural order of things.

Think for a minute about your own anxieties. You may think you don't have any, but just beneath the surface is another story. What keeps you up at night? What holds you back from your wildest dreams and hopes? What worries do you have that keep you from being free that have little or nothing to do with your ability to control them? In my own case, I'm not worried or anxious about getting the Covid-19 vaccine, nor about when I'll get it. It will happen when it does and is completely out of my control, at least for now. What am I worried or anxious about? Most everything else! I have an inexorable need to keep people around

me happy, safe, and comfortable. The problem is, most of other people's needs are either out of my control because they're bigger than me, or (pay attention to this one) other people don't need me to control their life, nor the outcome of their choices. Easy for me to say. Not so easy for me to live. It is an Achilles' heel for me. I've dealt with it all my life, but it keeps coming back.

McLaren reminds us that,

"anxiety doesn't stop it's dirty work at the individual level. It makes whole communities tense and toxic. Anxiety-driven systems produce a pecking order as anxious people compete and use each other in their pursuit of more stuff to stave off their anxiety. Soon, participants in such a system feel they can't trust anybody, because everyone's out for himself or herself, driven by fear. Eventually, anxiety-driven people find a vulnerable person or group to vent their anxiety upon. The result? Bullying, scapegoating, oppression, injustice. **And still they will be anxious** (emphasis mine). Before long, they'll be making threats and launching wars so they can project their internal anxiety on an external enemy. No doubt, many of Jesus' original hearers would have thought, *He's describing the Romans!* But to some degree, the diagnosis applies to all."

Who might Jesus be describing today? Before you name some other group, or person, consider that "the diagnosis applies to all."

The issue isn't that anxiety exists. We learn it at an early age, and struggle with it our whole life. The problem comes when we project our anxieties onto another. We say, "If those people would just...I can't believe how stupid those people are..." or worse. We spend all our time "picking the speck" out of someone

else's eyes that we fully miss getting the gigantic log out of our own. What Jesus is calling for is naming, examining, and hopefully reigning in our anxiety before we cause great harm to ourselves and others. Look around our country, and even within our church and community. Where is anxiety controlling us and where are we controlling our anxiety?

McLaren tells us (as does our scriptures for today), "Jesus advocates the opposite of an anxiety-driven system...He makes this staggering promise: if we seek God's kingdom and justice first, everything that we truly need – financially, physically, or socially – will be given to us. His promise makes sense." I know I've quoted McLaren a lot today, but I can't help it, this is the best chapter thus far in this book. If you buy the book for nothing more than this chapter, you will have done yourself a favor. It should be read by all of us and frequently. So just know that most of what I'm saying here comes from him.

When we focus anxiously on our own individual well-being without concern for our neighbor, we enter into rivalry and everyone is worse off. Our human chase for getting "what's mine" is literally killing us. For those of us out "earning it", we'll work hundreds of hours, threaten our own health, ignore, or barely engage our family, all so we can "have it all." What have we lost in getting "it all"? Who do we

blame when we don't get "what's ours"? What does our hoarding of land, resources and other things do to us and do to others? "When we learn from the songbirds and wildflowers to live by faith in God's abundance, we collaborate and share. We watch out for each other rather than compete with each other. We bless each other rather than oppress each other. We desire what God desires – for all to be safe, for all to truly be alive – so we work for the common good. **When this happens (emphasis mine), it's easy to see how everyone will be better off. Contagious aliveness will spread across the land!"**

I didn't even deal with how our anxiety leads us to being judgmental people. But "beneath our anxiety and judging lies an even deeper problem, according to Jesus. **We do not realize how deeply we are loved.** He invites us to imagine a child asking his mom or dad for some bread or fish. No parent would give their hungry child a stone or snake, right? If human parents, with all their faults, know how to give good gifts to their children, can't we trust the living God to be generous and compassionate to all who call out for help?

McLaren ends the chapter beautifully, and I'll end with his words:

So next time you're grouchy, angry, anxious, and uptight, here is some wisdom to help you come back from being "out of your mind" again. Try telling yourself, *My own anxiety is more dangerous to me than whatever I'm anxious about. My own habit of condemning is more dangerous to me than*

what I condemn in others. My misery is unnecessary because I am truly, truly, truly loved. From that wisdom, unworried, unhurried, unpressured aliveness will flow again.

Amen and Amen.