

Letting Go of Worrying and Fears

March 13, Lenten Series 2019

I didn't know this even existed, but Chapman University in California takes a poll every year of the greatest fears of Americans. Do you want to guess what the top ten fears of Americans are?

Here's the list: corruption of government officials (74%); pollution of oceans, rivers and lakes (62%); pollution of drinking water (61%); not enough money for the future (57%); people I love becoming seriously ill (57%); people I love dying (56%); air pollution (55%); extinction of plant and animal species (54%); global warming and climate change (53%); and high medical bills (53%). Some of those things we really should be concerned about.

I wonder what the disciples who followed Jesus would have been afraid of? What about these possibilities: being afraid that a Roman soldier might cause you and your family trouble; will your family have enough to eat when most people lived a hand-to-mouth existence; will your child who is sick get better (in the first century Roman Empire, a third of children died before their first birthday). There was a lot to worry about for the people in Jesus' day.

And yet Jesus says so often, Do not be afraid. He tells the disciples on a stormy sea, Do not be afraid. He tells a crowd of people who were living a day-to-day existence, Do not be afraid. Jesus says, If God takes care of the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, God will take care of you. Some variation of do-not-be-afraid is found over 200 times in the Scriptures.

So we might think, Jesus, it's easy for you to tell us, Don't be afraid. But how can I *not* be afraid? 40 million Americans have an anxiety disorder, so if you have trouble with anxiety, you are not alone. So at least is there a way to be less anxious? And what causes us to be anxious? What causes us to spend so much time worrying instead of trusting, being anxious instead of being joyful? Here's one of the problems: our brains are hard-wired to be anxious. When we lived in the jungle, we had to be concerned about getting eaten by a lion, and our fear helped us stay alive. So those who had brains and bodies that responded to fear survived. Those who had a better fight-or-flight response survived.

So fear is hard-wired into our brains as a survival tool. What do we do about it? Let me go back to that list of ten top fears. Some of those things we really ought to be concerned about- like climate change and polluted oceans. And one of the ways to lessen our fears is to do something about it, to vote for people who can help make changes, to alter our lifestyles so we can help make a difference. When you feel like you can have an impact to change things, it can lessen your fears.

But what about those other fears: will my loved one get sick? Will we have enough money? Maybe you worry about your grandchildren. How can we work on worrying less?

Let me say first of all that there is a place for medication. I believe medications that help us are a gift of God, whether that is an antibiotic or a chemo therapy drug or an anti-depressant. So I don't want you to feel guilty if you take a medication that helps you feel less anxious. But I am a pastor, not a psychologist, so I will talk about what I can this morning based on my understanding of St. Paul.

First of all, did you know that you are not your thoughts? You are behind your thoughts and you have a choice as to what you think. St. Paul says this in the Philippians passage I read earlier. By the way, just before this passage, he says that this faith community that he started needs to beware of some teachers who have a different understanding of the gospel. These were teachers that could have divided the church he started. He could have worried about that, but he chooses not to.

He also says that two women leaders in the church need to get along. He could worry about that too, but he chooses not to. Here's what he says instead: "Rejoice in the Lord always. (If I am rejoicing in God, I will have less capacity to be anxious. I will be looking for things to praise God about.) Then Paul says, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

Paul says instead of worrying, give it to God. When the worry keeps coming, visualize putting it in a bag, tying a ribbon around it, put it on a conveyor belt and watch it go away. And as you watch your worry disappear, open up a bag of thanksgiving. Fill your mind with thankful thoughts. Perhaps this is too strong an

image. Maybe our worries do not disappear. But they can move to the back of our minds as we refocus on thanksgiving.

Yesterday I used this text for my meditation time. I intentionally thought of some people and situations I am anxious about, but I didn't let that control my mind. For every one of those things I'm anxious about I thought of several other things that I am grateful for. And that gratitude began to fill my mind.

Saturday I co-led a retreat on St. Patrick, and we ended with an evaluation. We did a plus/minus chart. We asked 35 people what went well and what didn't. The list of positive things far outweighed the negative. But as I was driving home, it was the negative things that I was thinking about. That's the way the mind works, because, evolutionarily, the negative can be dangerous. So my mind said, you better think about these things. Well, I was not in danger. So I intentionally began to choose to be grateful for all the positive things that happened that day. I filled my mind with gratitude.

Paul says when you do this, when you give your requests and thanksgiving to God, then "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." When I give my requests to God, I practice letting them go, not holding onto them.

Then Paul tells us what to think about instead of our fears: "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." *Think about* actually is from the Greek for *take an account of, or keep a ledger of*. You might want to do that. Make a ledger of all that you are thankful for, and make sure it's a list that's longer than your fears.

If we are training our minds to think about what is true and just and pleasing and commendable, we will dwell less and less on our fears. We can become less anxious. We can place those fears in God's hands, do what we can do, and let go of the outcomes. If you are worried about a grandchild, you can write a letter, or send an email, maybe you can't even do that, but you do all that you can do, and you leave them in God's care, and then you let go of the outcome. All we can do is all

we can do. Then we trust in God's care. And we choose to fill our mind with thankfulness. "The peace of God that passes all understanding guard and keep your mind in Christ Jesus." Amen.