

“Amidst the Windstorm”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

Originally this was just going to be a light - but meaningful - sermon on Father's Day, with talking about anxiety, which all fathers have, to be honest. It just didn't seem quite right to play it quite that way today with everything that has gone on.

In just the past week or two, we have had shootings: last night in Philadelphia and Detroit, where even children were shot to death. We cannot even go to Coral Ridge Mall in Iowa City without there being a shooting. And to say nothing of those wonderful people who went to Charleston to their church, sat down in a predominately black church, reached out their arms and invited in a young man who was white, who clearly had to look troubled, brought him in, prayed with him and cared for him. Then he pulled a gun out of his little bag and murdered people.

I cannot imagine what it is like this morning, to be sitting in that congregation, because they are having services this morning; knowing and feeling the violence that must still feel so strong in that room. I can't imagine being the pastor who gives the sermon to that congregation this day. Our prayers go out to the victims' families and to all who have been touched.

I want to continue the sermon by talking on this situation of anxiety, because I can't imagine the level of anxiety and frustration and anger and pain that they [the church members in Charleston] are going through. Yet over and over again we saw the victims' families having to speak out in their moment and be Christian. I think if you talked to them in that moment, they would say, “I don't want to be Christian in this moment. I'm still angry. I'm still frustrated. I want to lash out, and look what God has done to me - making me be Christian in front of the cameras.”

I loved what the husband of one of the women - I believe she was one of the pastors - said, “I will come to forgive you because that is what Christians do.” I thought that was one of the most honest things I have heard, because he acknowledges that he is not there yet.

I think we sometimes give that forgiveness away because we are in shock. We say it because that's what we want to hear said in that service. They knew they had a huge responsibility to show Christ to the world amidst their great pain. I appreciated his honesty because for it to be truly a gift of forgiveness you have to mean it, and he is not ready to give up the frustration, the anxiety and anger yet - but because he is a Christian, he knows he will. I thought that was absolutely beautiful: to be honest, and yet to show his faith all at the same time. What he had to do in that moment was get beyond himself enough to see the greater picture. Our anxiety - our needs - often get in the way of one's ability to do that.

So I want to deal with the idea of anxiety on a huge scale, if I may for just a moment. I want to let you know, up front, that I am using a specific book or two: the main one is by

Scott Stossel called “My Age of Anxiety.” You don’t need to write it down; it’s on the back of the bulletin, I have given you two book titles.

Scott Stossel is someone who has been dealing with anxiety his entire life. He studied it as a way of helping himself, and he wrote the book for his own help and any others who go through what he goes through. He said, according to the National Institute for Mental Health, 40 million Americans suffer from some type of anxiety disorder that has been clinically named: that is one in seven Americans.

Count off as you go around this room; you have dozens upon dozens of people in here alone. I feel anxiety standing up here this morning, but that’s not what I am talking about. I’m talking about people who are clinically depressed, on medication; who are struggling desperately and they have been diagnosed by a physician. Thirty-one percent of all expenditures for health care in this country are due to anxiety. I can’t even come up with that [amount]. In your life time, 25 percent of all people in this country will be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder - that is one in four. Count off again in your row. Go around this room - as many as 100 of the almost 400 of you in this room diagnosed [are] with it.

I’m not talking just anxiety of being in front of people; I’m talking about totally gripping you and taking control of your life. The American Journal of Psychiatry, in 2006, said that Americans’ lose 360 million days of work due to anxiety and depression, and it costs the American economy \$50 billion annually.

This is a big deal. The number of people who are diagnosed - that one in seven, or one in four – miss, on average, 25 days [of work] a year due to simply anxiety and depression. Imagine the angst in all of that sadness and despair around us. These figures only refer to people who are classifiable as clinically anxious or depressed. Anxiety extends beyond just those who are officially dealing with mental illness issues; it goes on to any number of us. Eleven percent of all of the family visits to doctors were prompted by anxiety. We suffer, but we do not suffer alone - and it is not recent.

(I played with the children in the boat,) but Jesus was dealing with the Apostles who were dealing in anxious situations. Jesus gently rebuked them. First he rebuked the sea, by saying, “Peace. Be still.” The other place where Jesus used those words – “Peace. Be still.” - was in casting out demons. Not that anxiety is because of demons - but because it is something that God never intended that we should have to deal with and wishes that would all be cast out.

Jesus always attacks those things that threaten life and makes change. “Peace. Be still.” And, he uses us so that in moments of violence or bloodshed, God used people. This could have been just what that shooter wanted, a moment for racial divide and more violence.

Notice it has happened in other places. We have seen it in places like Baltimore, where this type of activity turned into just what that shooter wanted. But notice what happens when the Christians are attacked. They, literally, in their lives and the power of the Holy Spirit, said Jesus’ words: “Peace. Be still.”

There were no riots. There was no more bloodshed. There was prayer. There was forgiveness. There was honesty and there was mutual love.

How many times have you seen in the pictures on the news of all different nationalities crossing arms and holding onto each other? That is what happens when Christians set an example of "Peace. Be still." We need to be praying for those who are struggling and giving them the tools to overcome, because anxiety can become debilitating but - in its own way - it can also be something that can be beneficial.

Curt Goldstein in his work "Human Nature in the Light of Pathology" said, "The right capacity to bare anxiety is important to the individual's self-realization, and for his conquest in his environment. Self-actualization occurs only at the price of moving ahead despite the shocks. It indicates constructive use of anxiety." Now, what he is trying to say is that we all have anxiety at one level or another and - depending on a situation - it becomes more inflamed. How we deal with it not only impacts ourselves, but everyone around us. We need to provide the tools to make that happen.

I was shocked when I read what Scott Stossel said: that there was a study of Holocaust survivors, and they were trying to figure out how Holocaust survivors would continue in their lives after such a horrible experience. How did they function after being in concentration camps, watching so many die around them? How could they ever get over that level of anxiety? What they learned was even more profound. Not only did they see and were touched by how they moved forth; they were also amazed at how much anxiety they continued to live with throughout their lives, that they were not surprised by. What caught them was the level of anxiety that their children, and their grandchildren, and their great-grandchildren still carry.

They went on to do a study of all of the generations to the second, third and fourth generation and found - although they had never been in a concentration camp, and most of them had never even been to Europe; it was an American study - was because their grandparents and great-grandparents had been in Auschwitz or Buchenwald, that their great-grandchildren were still experiencing the anxiety at much higher levels than the rest of society.

How you and I deal with our anxiety will affect generations beyond ourselves. It is that important. It doesn't mean that we can't; it means that we need to learn to deal with it. Now there is also historical evidence - and this is where we move to the positive part - that anxiety can be aligned with our artistic creative genius if handled properly.

The literary genius Emily Dickinson was bound up by her anxiety. Not in spite of, but because of the anxiety and stress she had, she was able to write from the recess of her angst in a way that someone else who didn't have that would be unable to tap that area of her or himself. She almost never left her house and, from the age of 40 until the time of her death, she really never left her bedroom. And yet in that space in that small room she created so much.

T. S. Elliott learned to be highly reactive with his psychosis, and it helped him in his writing and in the way he looked at other people. Dean Simonton, a psychologist at

University of California at Davis, spent decades studying the psychology of genius. He estimated that over 1/3 of imminent scientists have clinical anxiety and depression. It drives them to overcome it by performing. Maybe they can receive their self-worth in what they produce. That can be a negative thing, but it also can be incredibly motivating if it is handled properly.

Issac Newton invented calculus. I never liked him for that, but after he invented it, he told no one for ten years. He was too anxious and depressed to even care - or that anyone else would care. Ten years he kept it to himself.

Sigmund Freud was derailed through a great amount of his career because of his anxiety; but to harness it, to make it better like the Apostles, who knew in their moment that they had nowhere else to turn but to Jesus, figured out how to respond.

One of my favorite writers is a Buddhist Monk named Thich Nhat Hanh. He writes a book entitled "Fear." In his way of guiding people through that fear is through, of course, with a Buddhist Monk meditation: to focusing on the moment, in the present; to deal through [your anxiety] with your breathing and control, but to not entirely overcome the anxiety. At this time there is no cure for anxiety and depression, but there are ways of managing it, so that you cannot only survive in it, but thrive in it.

Thich Nhat Hanh guides you through that process to view and see it [anxiety] for what it is. Like I told the children [during the service], when you make it more and more anxious in the moment you make the problem bigger than it really is, to the point that you have no way of addressing it. But when you handle it [anxiety] with a clear mind, you can overcome just about anything. Anxiety is an inhibition and a social sensitivity. It allows people with anxiety often to view people, because they are always concerned about what others are saying and how they are feeling. They tend to have much more empathy. They tend to know how things are going in a room. They are worried about how the person that was left out is feeling. Because of that, they tend to be better spouses, and - on this day - better husbands.

Anxiety isn't always bad, if it is handled properly. Scott Stossel says fighter pilots have an unusually high divorce rate because they have an unusually low anxiety rate. Having almost no anxiety gives them the ability to get into fights, and be calm and figure out how to win. But, correspondingly, their adventurousness creates an inner personal obtuseness, he says, and a lack of sensitivity that carries through to their partner in subtle social cues and makes them nearly impossible to live with.

At some controlled level of anxiety, it can be a blessing and we need to receive it as such. Rollo Main says, anxiety cannot be avoided, but it can be reduced. The problem with the management of anxiety is that of reducing anxiety to a normal deal-able level and then to use this normal anxiety stimulation to increase one's awareness, vigilance and zeal for living. It's not about perfection but it's about dealing with it in a positive way.

So, if anxiety has positive attributes, don't feel shame. Figure out and realize that you have - with your anxiety or depression - more to deal with, than more than the other 75 percent. The fact that you are sitting here, the fact that you are strong and able to function

- even enough to be here today and get out of your house - means that you should be wearing a badge of honor, because you have weathered the storm, you have endured. You have not let the voices that make you feel low or bad win the day.

It's important to remember that you cannot do it alone. For some, medication is vitally important. For others, a therapist is necessary and - because we are people of faith - we believe that God always needs to be a part of the process.

A therapist can say it until he or she is blue in the face and the medication can cover it up, but only God through Jesus Christ, through the movement of the Holy Spirit, can say, "Peace. Be still," and calm our hearts enough to get the job done. Fight the good fight with anxiety and depression, and let God allow you to finish the race. By managing it, you might just thrive.

Amen.