

“Set Free”

May 23rd, 2021
Romans 8: 12 – 17 CEB

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Wall Street United Virtual Church (63)

How have your anxiety levels been lately? How about in the past year? I bet they've been high or at least higher than in the before times. It has certainly been a high anxiety year for me because I like to be in control; or at least feel like I'm in control. So whenever things are beyond my control — illness, church building is open, church building is closed, I can go to this store, now I can't; I get anxious. I tend to feel anxiety as a tightening in my chest. That's something that is interesting to me: though anxiety is a mind thing, we feel it in our body, don't we?

What makes you anxious? Maybe it's being in control, maybe if you're a perfectionist it's making a mistake, maybe if you are a people pleaser, disappointing someone will make you feel anxious. And where do you feel anxiety in your body? Those are two important questions that I want you to start thinking about. I want you to notice when you are anxious and likely you will notice it first through your body – your mind will start to race or you'll I feel it in your gut, in your chest, in your shoulders. Usually, we become aware that we *are* anxious before we know *why* we are anxious.

Our scripture reading is Paul's letter to the Romans. You might remember that Paul started by being totally opposed to these early followers of Jesus. He was not neutral, he was not agnostic; he was vehemently opposed to them. He was on team Jewish against team Jesus. When you see the great divides today between for example Trump-loving Republicans and Democrats, or let's take a more extreme example — between Leafs fans and Habs fans – Paul was stridently on one side against the other side. Until he saw the light.

Literally on the road to Damascus he was blinded and at the same time he heard a voice from heaven saying “Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?” Notice that when we persecute and oppress people, Jesus receives it as persecution of himself. Even though Jesus had died, been resurrected and had ascended to heaven, he felt the stoning of Stephen and the persecution of the Church personally. We do well to remember that. I can't help but think of this as this week we learned of the gut-wrenching truth, that the remains of 215 Indigenous children, some as young as 3, have been found at the former Kamloops Residential school. Jesus doesn't just know about and feel badly about the suffering of the innocent, Jesus receives suffering as directed and

inflicted on himself. When you realize that those who perpetrated this evil called themselves Christian, it just adds to the horror.

When Paul hears the voice of Jesus saying “Why are you persecuting me?” he does a 180; he crosses the floor and becomes probably the greatest apostle of the early church. After traveling around and starting churches all around the Mediterranean, Paul ends up being a prisoner under house arrest and he writes letters to these new churches. This letter was written to the church in Rome, and a lot of it centers around the theme of being set free from the slavery of sin and set free from the law and becoming free in Christ.

It is worth noting that when Paul talks about sin, he is not talking about the things we do that are bad, he is talking about being in the condition of sin. In almost every instance in the letter to the Romans, sin is a noun not a verb. We often think of sin as doing things we shouldn't: lying, stealing your neighbour's WiFi, sneaking down to the kitchen to finish off the ice cream. Those things can be symptoms of sin, but sin is a bigger condition that separates us from God. Paul sets up two ways of living: a way of life and a way of death, a way of love and a way of selfishness. “So then, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation, but it isn't an obligation to ourselves to live our lives on the basis of selfishness. If you live on the basis of selfishness, you are going to die.” (Romans 8:12) Selfishness really is the opposite of a life lived with God.

Here's the thing: if what you focus on, and give the most attention to, is not God, you will ultimately fall short of all your life could be. Whenever we put anything higher than God as our focus and priority it becomes idolatry, *it becomes our God*. And because it's not actually God, no life can come from it, but instead it becomes a source of anxiety and leads to death.

Remember what Jesus said the greatest commandment was? *“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.’”* (Mark 12:29-31)

There are a lot of things that separate us from God, but fear and anxiety are among the biggest. I want to be clear that fear and anxiety are natural to us humans. I don't want you to be anxious about being anxious. But I think we'd all agree that 95% of the time anxiety and fear are not good for us. If you see a toddler wander out into the middle of traffic and you feel anxiety – that's a

good thing, but most of the time, like throughout this pandemic, it is not. You're not a bad person because you are an anxious person, but anxiety is not helping you to be your best you.

I was listening to a little story on CBC radio this week about your biological age verses your chronological age. Many believe that our biological age is far more significant than how old you actually are. I am connected to a Refugee family where the mother is not much older than me, but after a lifetime without adequate healthcare and filled with hardship and stress that we can't begin to imagine, her biological age is easily 20 years older than mine.

To test your biological age — which is really all about figuring how close you are to death — they would give the participant a Fitbit type of device to track activity levels and then look at bloodwork along with medical conditions. I was feeling pretty confident about my biological age being younger than my chronological age until the interviewer asked: "What ages us?" and the interviewee responded without hesitation: "Oh, it's stress". She talked about physical stress and inflammation in the body and she talked about mental and psychological stress. (At that point I changed my mind and decided I was probably much older than my chronological age!)

I recently bought a book by the author Steve Cuss called *Managing Leadership Anxiety*. Cuss is an expert in anxiety. I suffer from anxiety; I have for years. I am pretty functional in my anxiety and I think I do a pretty good job of managing it through prayer and meditation and exercise, but I still have it and so when I heard this podcast, I knew I had to hear more from Steve Cuss on the subject.

I have not finished the book, because I have too many other books I'm supposed to be reading right now (which causes me anxiety) but quite a bit of this sermon comes from what I have understood out of what I have read so far, so I wanted to give credit to Steve Cuss.

Being in a state of anxiety keeps us at a distance from God because our focus and attention is on something other than God. Anxiety feeds itself on lies about our needs. Anxiety will take a fact; like in preparation for the Doctorate of ministry course coming up in 3 weeks, I have 1 sermon to write, 2 small papers, 2 more books to finish and a large number of articles. Anxiety will take a fact and tell us a lie: "There is too much work, I can't possibly get it all done in time. There is not enough time. I don't have enough energy. I don't have enough intelligence... I am not enough."

If you are a perfectionist and you make a mistake which reminds you of the fact that you are not actually perfect, this will cause you anxiety. The lie that anxiety is telling you is that unless you try harder, do better, and do it right, you are not good enough. Your flaws and your failings make you worth less instead of worth more. The lie tells you that you are worthless. You have to do a bit of digging to name the lie that anxiety is telling you, but the lie is always that something other than God will save us. If only that person liked me, then I would feel lovable. If only I had more money, then I would feel secure. If only I could get my act together, then I would have control and therefore have peace. If only I drink a little more I'll be able to handle the stress ... Can you see how that is a slavery that leads to death? If those are the lies, then what is the truth?

Our scripture says: "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption." (Romans 8:16) When we give our lives to God, when we decide to follow Jesus, we are set free. And "*If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed!*" (John 8:36). If you want real peace, real joy, if you truly want to know that you are worth it, that you are beautiful and intelligent – that you are enough—then turn your energy, your attention and your worship to the only One who can give you Life.

This does not mean that our living will be easy, but we will know in our gut what Paul knew: "*I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.*" (Philippians 4:13). We can also hear the words: "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*" (2 Corinthians 12:9) Like Paul we can say "*For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.*" (Romans 8:38-39)

So here is your homework.

- **Notice** this week when you are anxious. Notice where in your body you feel that anxiety. In a way anxiety can be helpful because anxiety is a warning light that you are focusing on something that is not bringing life instead of focusing on God who sets us free and brings us life.
- **Do something** to relax your body: take some slow deep breaths, stretch, sit and meditate, go for a walk. When we relax the body it helps to relax the mind.
- **Take a moment to pray** and ask Jesus what is the **lie** I am telling myself?

- Finally, ask Jesus “What is the **truth**?” Pray that the lie will be dug up and uprooted from your heart and that the beautiful truth will be planted in its place.

The bad news is that this is easier said than done. It really takes practice, so be patient and accept the grace that God gives you. There’s a reason that Jesus said “Take up your cross daily”. But it’s pretty amazing when you die to yourself – when you stop putting all this energy into being good enough or in control — all of a sudden you have energy and room in your life for the world that is beyond you, the world that God loves so very much.

Thanks be God. Amen.

“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things have passed away; behold, the new has come” (II Cor. 5:17)

Footnote: Today, May 30, is the 22nd anniversary of my ordination. I was ordained by my father, Rev. Dr. Alan Bennett, who was the conference president that year. Today is also the first anniversary of his passing. I remember when I was being interviewed for the position here, someone asked “If we hire you, how will you manage, standing in your father’s shadow?” And in one of those moments when the Holy Spirit just gives you the answer, I replied “I won’t be standing in his shadow — I’ll be standing on his shoulders.”

I still feel that to this day, and give thanks for his ministry in this church and all he meant to us.