

27 February 2011

“The Counteract”

by Rev Rusty Butler

Scripture: Matthew 6: 24-34

In God's good time God will override the present. That is a mouthful. It is a mouthful for liberals who have taken on too much of Feuerbach and who believe that "God has no hands but ours." It is a mouthful for conservatives who trust in the God "who changeth not." It is an intellectual scandal for modernity, which believes that there will be no new pieces of reality given, that all that remains is to govern well what is and will be, and that all one is left to do is secure as much of reality for oneself as one can.

Instead I have no doubt that without that claim...that God will override the present, one is finally left in despair, because at best, one is fated to more of the same.

A defeated self, one that cannot embrace hope, ends in depression, perhaps in suicide, perhaps in cynicism, perhaps in brutality. Violence is an act of despair where nothing new is expected.

A defeated world with out hope of newness, driven by an economy of scarcity where there is never enough eventuates in greed and monopoly and sets up the discrepancies between the haves and the have-nots.

A defeated church that does not believe its own life can be transformed by the spirit and the world ends in the grudging contentiousness of competing claims and interests, devoid of energy for mission, too worried about control.

Into this large season of defeat for self, for world, for church the ministry of the good news sounds the sounds of hope.

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It is the Counterworld of Good News.

The Counterworld

Today we are going to talk about anxiety. About your anxiety and mine.

I read this week that:

Anxiety is a disproportionate reaction to an imaginary danger.

Sigmund Freud said that there are three basic fears that we bring into adulthood from our childhood. One is that our bodies are going to decay. If you don't believe it, why do we have contact lenses, toupees and Clairol? Why do we wear hearing aids? Why? Because our bodies are beginning to decay. "The second fear," said Freud, "is that external forces will overwhelm us without mercy." Have you ever felt that you were going to be taken over by forces you cannot control? If you don't have that fear yet, watch the evening news. The third fear we bring from our childhood to adulthood is the fear of relationships with others. We think that somehow others can hurt us. This is the fear that bothers us more than the other two because we need people, but we're afraid of them.

That is so true isn't it?

Lynn and I happened to go down to the Mayan to watch a movie last week. On the way there we saw a thrift shop on Broadway and she said, let's go to that after the movie. I said that's fine. When we returned we pulled up and there was a young man moving between the racks of clothes, What we noticed about this young man was that he wasn't wearing any pants but instead hot pink and black tights and a short jacket, a scarf and a hat. It was an interesting outfit. We watched for awhile as he moved between racks, he was agitated we could tell, on drugs maybe...? I don't know. But we looked at each other and said, maybe we will come back on another day. We need people but are afraid of them at the same time.

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We are in a great crowd when it comes to being anxious.

Some of you remember Bill Russell. He was a terrific Basketball player. His Celtic's team won eleven NBA championships. 24 times in the history of the NBA someone has had 40 or more rebounds in a single game. Bill Russell did that 8 times. Bill Russell had a pre-game routine. It was unusual and it never varied. He would sit in the locker room, joking and playing cards, and then dash to the bathroom to throw up before the tip-off.

That my friends is anxiety. Even the best have anxiety.

We all know about anxiety.

I attended a meeting on Friday afternoon at the Conference Headquarters. It was put on by the General Board of Pensions and Benefits. There were two women who were leading it from the General Board. They'd invited a number of ministers to this meeting and we were told about the way our Pensions and Benefits would be changing after the 2012 General Conference, and we were supposed to pass it on to our colleagues who couldn't be there.

They called it a "listening" session. They laid out for us the reductions in benefits and said you had better start saving.

The meeting was supposed to be from 1-3:30. At 4 p.m. we were halfway through their presentation. There were a lot of questions. Can you say "anxiety?"

They talked about how many United Methodist pastors were on disability and they pointed out that the number one reason was stress and anxiety. "Pastors," they reported, "are about 4 times as likely as regular folk to be on disability for stress and anxiety related factors!

I do not know about you but that says to me one of two things: 1) whenever you hear a pastor talking about stress and anxiety do not listen!

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Or, 2) maybe you should really listen hard because they know what they are talking about!

I thought it slightly ironic that they gave us this information this week when this scripture that we read this morning is the one that most of the pastors will be preaching on today.

Yesterday I went to the Metropolitan District Annual Conference. There were 150 people there from churches around the Metro area...on a Saturday. Why in the world? When we get together like that there is anxiety. You can feel it in the air. Are we going to survive? Who is doing what and is it working? What churches are going down? Are we selling any more churches? Why isn't there anyone under 40 here? Lot's of questions! Anxiety in the church...

Do not be anxious about your life? Easy to say, so much harder to do.

But it is what Jesus told the crowds. Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. That is the way the Revised Standard Version of the Bible has it.

Even the day will be anxious for itself. I never heard that before. But it is there. There may be some truth to it.

I am not an expert at anxiety and I have as much trouble as anyone else with what Jesus said. It seems so...impossible not to be anxious about your life.

What are you anxious about? Think about it for a minute....(take a minute.)

What are the underlying reasons can you get to them?

Anxious about not looking good?

About not being good?

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About being accepted?

About failing?

What's at the bottom of your anxiety?

There is a scene from a book called *God and Human Freedom*. In it a pastor in Evanston, IL, recalls having Howard Thurman as a guest; and as he welcomed Dr. Thurman into his office, he shared with Dr. Thurman all of the things he was doing in his ministry and all of the new programs the church was starting to reach out into the community. And after he shared all that he was doing, Dr. Thurman finally looked in his direction and asked, "And who are you?" He said at that moment he was reminded that he was legion, legion of doing, doing, doing, doing, but never stopping to be. Never stopping to be.

I don't know what anxieties you have...but I know we have them a disproportionate reaction to an imaginary danger.

How do we deal?

In Edward Hay's book *Prayer for a planetary pilgrim*, he writes this prayer, My beloved one. How easily do I allow anxiety to be the soil of my life. Ten thousand anxieties cluster at my door: anxiety about death and life.

Anxiety about thieves and evil.

Anxiety about sickness and old age.

Anxiety about unemployment and war.

Anxiety about being shamed and injured.

How easily do politicians and preachers,

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Merchants and advertisers feed off my countless hidden anxieties and fears.

Yet in you and you alone do I find sufficient strength to live my life unafraid.

I firmly believe that you love me O God with all my faults and failings and if I am in your embrace, why should I be anxious?

Teach me the wisdom of caution, to live with a watchful eye, and liberate me from this anxiousness.

Today we consider anxiousness...*do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.*