

“Freedom from Anxiety and Judgmentalism”

Matthew 6:19-21, 24-34; Matthew 7:1-5

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The kids are not all right. That seems to be the sentiment of so many experts of late, especially in the wake of the CDC report Youth Risk Behavior Study released last month. The study showed some pretty severe increases in depression and anxiety among young people and since that time researchers and pundits have been scrambling to find causation behind the trends. Is it the Covid impact? Is it the rise of social media with all of its harmful side effects? Is it climate change and the sense of hopelessness that we are moving toward more significant harm to the planet and its creatures, harm that no one seems to be able to stop? Is it our political polarization? Is it liberal “cancel culture?” Or is it the dystopian unease stemming from what seems like capitalism’s precarious footing?

The kids are not all right and many of us are concerned about it. Of course, children do not exist in isolation from their family of origin, their friends, and their community. If the kids are not all right, then it’s likely the rest of us are struggling, too.¹ Some of the rest of us are struggling with increases in anxiety and depression ourselves. Some of the rest of us are struggling with a sense of alienation from our place in the world. Some of the rest of us are having a hard time adjusting to the world as we find it. I’ve compared notes with clergy colleagues and we all seem to be noticing upticks in conflicts between leaders or staff, less patience on the part of some to participate in activities that do not unfold exactly as they want them to or people who do not act exactly as they want them to. Like the researchers and the pundits, we’re struggling, too, to make sense of what this means. One of my colleagues put it this way - “I think after being shut up in our houses for a year and a half dreaming about the day when that would end, we now find ourselves incredibly disappointed with the lives we have returned to and we just don’t know how to articulate it.”

I don’t know whether that analysis is the right one or not. In fact, I’ve decided it’s too early to draw any firm conclusions about the nature of the dis-ease for any of us. Better to be curious about what ails us in the absence of definitive data than to narrow in too quickly on any one factor. My friend, MaryAnn McKibben Dana, likened this

¹ This sermon was already written when the New York Times published this article early on the same Sunday morning on which it was preached: “What if Kids are Sad and Stressed Because Their Parents Are?” David French, *The New York Times*, March 19, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/19/opinion/teen-adult-depression-anxiety.html>.

mental health epidemic to the study of pollution.² We can all see the results of pollution downstream and it would be nice if we could point upstream to a single smoke stack or factory culprit that would address our problems downstream. But the reality is that the source of most pollution comes from many different things. If you want to get the stream healthy you have to identify as many of those points as possible and address them together.

Meanwhile, as we wait for more specific data on those points that ails us, Jesus, centuries before the emergence of the science of psychology, teaches his disciples that anxiety is a human problem at the root of so many of our personal and societal conflicts. We worry about what we'll wear, what we'll eat, and when we'll die. Then, like now, the problem is that anxiety over life can quickly get in the way of actually experiencing life.

Anxiety is more than an individual problem. It can make whole communities uptight and toxic. Anxious people have to do something with their anxiety so soon it spills out onto other vulnerable people - multiplying and spreading like a virus. Pretty soon a vulnerable family, community, or even society can find itself amplifying bullying and scapegoating behaviors. The fingers point even farther as people learn from their own anxious system that the way to deal with their own anxious discomfort is by attributing it to someone else.³

Jesus offers not so much an antidote to anxiety in the system, but an alternative one altogether, powered by faith, a system which he calls God's kingdom of justice. A kingdom not because Jesus is a monarchist, but because that's the governance model that he and his disciples were living in and Jesus wanted them to understand that there was an alternative to it. If we transpose that arrangement into our own governance system we might rightly call Jesus' alternative - God's economy of justice. We are invited into an alternative economy - a way of treating what's valuable in our lives and in the world that can free us from the anxiety that is baked into the one we've inherited. Here's what Brian McClaren calls the staggering promise of this alternative economy - "if we seek God's kingdom and justice first, everything that we truly need - financially, physically, or socially - will be given to us."⁴ This isn't a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps prosperity gospel vision that focuses only on individual efforts. "If you pray this then God will reward you" nonsense. This is a vision that rests on the collective.

If we're focusing on God's economy that is built on neighbor love and care then we learn to collaborate and share. But if we're oriented on our own individual security and success, we're always in competition with each other and some get more than what

² "On Depression and Pollution," MaryAnn McKibben Dana, <https://maryannmckibbendana.substack.com/p/on-depression-and-pollution>.

³ Brian McClaren states this well in his book, *We Make This Road by Walking*, (New York: Jericho Books), 2014, which serves as the organizing principle for this Lenten sermon series. This is an idea that is well known to many pastors in connection with our training around Bowen Family Systems theory.

⁴ Ibid, 141.

they need while others lose. You can see that in systems large and small. From the economy of say, the 8th grade, where most are anxiously clamoring to be on the winning side of social cred, to the excesses of global capitalist economy that makes some so wealthy they are constantly and anxiously having to find new places to put their overflowing resources, while others are sleeping on the front step.

But Jesus goes even farther. As McClaren writes, “anxious people are judgmental people. Worried that someone is judging them, they constantly judge others, which, of course, intensifies the environment of judgment for everyone. Just as anxiety becomes contagious and creates an anxiety-driven system, judgment easily creates accusatory systems in which no one can rest, no one can be themselves, no one can feel free.”⁵

Our church has a number of people who are sometimes anxious and judgmental. I know that because I’m one of them. Part of the reason I was attracted to Brown Memorial is because I have a critical mind and appreciate being in a place with an abundance of critically-minded people who think deep thoughts about why the world and life is the way they are. But it took me a lot of years of personal work to discover that anxiety is not a necessary precursor to excellence. I didn’t need to sweat in turmoil over every sermon or other actions in order for it to turn out usable for someone else. A critical posture that lapses into judgmentalism isn’t necessary either. You can have a critical mind that enables you to discern what is good and right while also cultivating a generous spirit for yourself and others around you.

What Jesus points out is that the best way toward that kind of economy of grace and justice - in fact the only way to create it - is by first focusing on yourself and I would add while staying connected to the community around you. When it comes to the church, staying connected is important for a couple of reasons. It is often the best alternative to fight or flight - standing in the midst of tension is where we often have the greatest opportunity for personal growth. But the creating and sustaining the community that Jesus envisions depends on those of us who are not directly embroiled in conflict or controversy, bringing our ability to stand in the middle of anxious situations with the kind of clearheaded grace, and nonjudgmental selves that is needed. Sometimes simply choosing not to disengage is the most important way you can love your neighbor as yourself.

If all this is sounding a little too much like a public service announcement for church from your very self-interested pastor, remember that Matthew’s Gospel wants you to see Jesus as the new Moses - the liberator. And Jesus wants to challenge those who think about liberation only as doing the protest work to get the community out from under the grip of Pharaoh. That’s not even half the work according to the Exodus narrative. The rest of the work is trying to carve out a new kind of community that isn’t constantly recreating the oppressive structures that God has freed you from. You need

⁵ Ibid, 142.

to be liberated not just from these external oppressive structures but from the ones you've internalized. You need to be deprogrammed from all those messages that have told you that you are not good enough, not attractive enough, not rich enough, not the right race, not the right gender, not the right ability and reprogrammed with the core message that you are God's creation, beautiful and loved. And there needs to be a community that is trying hard to build a community centered on that message and way.

This is a big part of what church is for. It's the petri dish where we play with all the possibilities of living into God's economy, understanding that along the way we're going to struggle - struggle to be liberated from whatever continues to warp your mind and spirit, preventing you from experiencing the full freedom that Jesus promises you will find. And it could save your life. Two studies were released recently that suggest that the most significant reason for an increase in so-called deaths of despair - death from things like suicide or drug overdos - is a decline in church attendance. One of the same studies pointed out that personal prayer made no such difference. The community aspect of church was the essential ingredient.⁶

This is where you will work out your salvation, according to the Gospel. The trouble with church, of course, is that you'll have to live alongside others who are also struggling to be liberated from the demons and the Pharaohs that have held them captive. Not all by yourself, but alongside the wretched and beautiful humanity of siblings of Christ who need to get their stuff together, too.

Working to get it together in a very anxious time in history for adults and children alike, in a very anxious economic system, in a very anxious world to create a different kind of community of love and care and respect and growth. It's work, but, according to Jesus, it could be the best way toward your own freedom and wholeness.

⁶ "Places with High Religious Participation Have Fewer Deaths of Despair," *The Economist*, February 27, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2023/02/27/places-with-high-religious-participation-have-fewer-deaths-of-despair>.