

From Stress to Rest: Our Emotions
Philippians 4:4-9, Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

What do you think about most when you are taking a shower? One thousand adults in the United States – ages 25-54 – were asked that question recently by the Ketchum Global Research Network [Anne Carey and Sam Ward, “Snapshots: What Do You Think About in the Shower?” *USA Today* (6-5-09)]. Here were the top four responses in the survey on what people think about in the shower:

- (1) To-do lists
- (2) Problems and worries
- (3) Daydreams
- (4) Work.

Many of us here this morning are in another age category. So I wonder what the top responses would be for us. Would they be much different? I imagine we all – no matter our age -- have daily to-do lists and our own set of problems and worries. We all daydream to some extent (perhaps about our next travel destination or time away at the cottage) and our work may be more volunteer-oriented than strictly 9 to 5. The survey results do reveal an intriguing insight into what human beings in North America obsess over as they wake up in the morning or wind down in the evening -- the two times most people take a shower or a bath. At the same time we wipe away perspiration and oils and bacteria to start the day, we often take on stress and disappointment. While we try our best to clear the clutter from our minds with a nice long shower or bath in the evening, we often find our minds overflowing with thoughts about places to go, people to see, dreams to fulfil. As one person noted: “We are a people who can barely go one minute without pondering the many things we feel we need to do, must do, should be doing but are not.” So it is not too difficult to understand that we are people who exhibit more stress than peace or rest in our emotional life.

I also want to acknowledge that no one is immune from stress – not even clergy. All of us are subject to the struggles and strains of living that are part of our universal human experience. Someone once asked me if I was always “up.” I think I answered “Most of the time.” But I am essentially an introvert and that seems to make me more pensive perhaps -- at least, Marg would tell you I am that way. But let me be honest with you: there are times when my spirit is low for a variety of reasons. Once, when I was a chaplain, one of the nurses said she had never seen me walk out of the hospital looking so depressed as I did the night before. But the next morning was different and I appeared again in the “onward and upward” mode, as I sometimes sign my emails. This past week, I felt a visceral, gut-wrenching emotional response to the earthquake devastation in Haiti. Most of us no doubt have felt similar emotions. They reveal the universal emotional connections we have with every human being on this planet.

Dr. Gregory Knopf is a family practice physician particularly interested in treating anxiety and depression. He calls the body:

“a finely tuned homeostatic mechanism that ... reveals a compassionate God who equipped it with systems to respond to every life contingency. As a physician, I marvel at both the body’s complexity and its ability to adapt (sometimes in an instant) to change in our

circumstances. The brain's capacity to mediate emotion in the process of such adaptation is a good example of how fearfully and wonderfully we're made."

That is part of the reason why I also understand that the stress people feel in their emotions -- especially related to acute anxiety or depression -- may have medical roots. So it is important then that we check and double-check with our doctors to ensure any medications we are taking help our bodies beneficially to adapt to changing circumstances -- rather than having the opposite effect.

As Christians we also need to understand that God designed our bodies and also our whole being with ways that complement each another to help us move from stress to rest in our lives. This morning I want to centre our thinking on a few of the significant ways God has given us to experience a sense of peace and rest in the midst of the circumstances and even in the midst of the emotions of our lives.

The Apostle Paul wrote the Letter to the Philippians not on a beach in Greece but from a prison cell in Rome. His circumstances do not seem conducive to joy. And, yet, in Philippians 4:4-7, Paul introduces the way to God's peace with these thoughts:

- (1) **Rejoice always** as you live in the Lord. The idea is to remember God and to celebrate God and God's presence with you all day, every day.
- (2) **Be gentle** in your attitude toward others. That reminds me of what Jesus said in what we call the Golden Rule: Do unto others what you would like them to do to you. And don't we all want people to be gentle with us and give us the benefit of the doubt? Be gentle with people.
- (3) **Don't worry about anything.** Remember Jesus' comment from Matthew 6:27 that we looked at a couple of weeks ago: "Can anyone live a bit longer [or grow a bit taller] by worrying?" The idea is to trust God and not let a lack of trust in God's care take away our strength and immobilize us.
- (4) Instead, Paul says, **ask God for what you need with a thankful heart.** And that, of course, is what Jesus taught.

If we do these things in our lives, then God's peace will keep our hearts and minds safe in union with Christ Jesus. Even when imprisoned or treated unjustly Paul would say.

I like the way *The Message* Bible helps us understand the meaning in these verses:

"Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life."

I also like the traditional statement of verse 7: "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will *guard* your hearts and your minds through Christ Jesus." This is a picture of a garrison or a military sentinel keeping guard over a city or a fort to maintain peace and to protect against attacks. The city of Philippi in Paul's time was guarded by a Roman garrison, so

the metaphor would probably appeal to his readers. What Paul says to his friends is this: when you pray and trust God, God's peace – a gift of wholeness and well-being -- will stand like a guard to *keep your hearts and minds safe* when worry and anxiety begin to attack us.

This leads into what Paul said in Philippians 4:8. He reminds us -- 2,000 years before psychologists were teaching this truth -- that **we are what we think**. He wrote: "In conclusion, my brothers and sisters, fill your minds with those things that are good and that deserve praise: things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and honourable."

If we tend to be people with sour dispositions, holding resentments inside, with feelings of self-pity, self-centredness and self-indulgence, then our perspective about ourselves and our perception of others will be distorted and blurred. Author John Steinbeck wryly observed: "A sad soul will kill you quicker, far quicker, than a germ." Then, any healing – moving from stress to rest -- will be difficult indeed.

However, if we are people who concentrate on what is good and what makes life meaningful, then the stage is set for moving from stress to emotional rest and peace. *The Message Bible* puts Philippians 4:8 this way:

"Friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious -- the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse."

We are what we think.

Have you read the book or seen the movie *A Beautiful Mind*? The movie came out about nine years ago. It traces the life of genius mathematician and Nobel Prize winner John Forbes Nash Jr. who is tortured by paranoid schizophrenia. A most intriguing scene for me was when Thomas King from the Nobel Prize Committee met with Nash to assess his mental state and determine if he would be a suitable Nobel laureate. In their conversation, Nash says to King tongue in cheek, "I *am* crazy." Then more soberly he says: "I take the newer medications, but I still see things that are not here. *I just choose* not to acknowledge them. Like a diet of the mind, *I just choose* not to indulge certain appetites."

That's part of the essence of thinking about what is best: *we choose* where *not* to spend our time and energy in thinking and indulging our mind and emotions. But the other part of thinking about what is best involves *choosing* what we think about and expending our time and energy on what is good and excellent. When we fill our minds, we are meant to reflect carefully on good things in order that they may shape our actions. But these good qualities – whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely and commendable -- are not merely for the head, they also need to be transformed into action.

Let me illustrate this from the 1956 film *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*. Gregory Peck starred as Thomas Rath. It has been a while since I have seen the film but I believe the circumstances in which Rath finds himself are as contemporary in 2010 as they were in the 1950s.

Rath was married with three children and worked at a job paying him a meagre \$7,000 a year. He was satisfied with his job and paycheque but his wife knew he was not the go-getter he once was. She wanted to know what had happened to him and challenged him for his lack of optimism. So at her urging, Thomas found a much higher paying job working for the president of a high-profile corporation. However, he soon found himself in a predicament when his boss asked him to critique an important speech he was to give. Thomas thought the speech was terrible. But he was reluctant to tell his boss the truth because he feared losing his well-paying position. In one scene, Betsy his wife pleads for Thomas to be honest.

Thomas explains to her: "I've told you that this is a loaded situation with all kinds of angles to it. But there's another side to it, which I think you must have overlooked. It just so happens that I have landed in one of the neatest positions in the whole organization, right next to Hopkins himself. It's a spot that three-quarters of the people at UBC would give their right arms for, and he likes me. I know it. Now will you try to remember what that could mean to us if I handle it carefully?"

Betsy adds, "If you handle it carefully *and honestly*, yes."

Thomas asks her: "Aren't you the one who wanted more money, a new house, no more worries every week?"

"I still do," she admits. "But that wasn't the real idea. The real idea was that I wanted you to go out and fight for something again, like the fellow I married. Not to turn into a cheap, slippery yes-man."

"That's wonderful," Thomas responds. "But would you think about this for a minute or two? When a man's got plenty of security, money in the bank, other jobs waiting for him, it's a cinch to be fearless and full of integrity. But when he's got a wife and three children to support, and his job's all he's got, what do you think he ought to do about it then?"

"I know what I'd do," Betsy states firmly.

"I never wanted to get in to this rat race," Thomas laments. "But now that I'm in it I think I'd be an idiot not to play it the way everybody else plays it."

"For a decent man," Betsy replies, "*there's never any peace of mind without honesty*, and I've always thought of you as a decent man. Right now it just makes me wonder how long it'll be before you decide it'll be simpler and safer not to tell *me* the truth."

We are what we think. And as we think, so we will behave.

My friends, I conclude with a quotation from poet, pastor and teacher William Arthur Ward. This is my prayer for myself and for you as we live our lives together in connection with God through Jesus Christ:

I will do more than belong -- I will participate.

I will do more than care -- I will help.
I will do more than believe -- I will practise.
I will do more than be fair -- I will be kind.
I will do more than forgive -- I will forget.
I will do more than dream -- I will work.
I will do more than teach -- I will inspire.
I will do more than earn -- I will enrich.
I will do more than give -- I will serve.
I will do more than live -- I will grow.
I will do more than suffer -- I will triumph.

May this be so for you and for me.

Rev. Chris Miller
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