



Simply to Flourish

Intro | Awareness of Withering

September 10, 2023

Prelude – Psalm 92 by Poor Bishop Hooper

Welcome/Announcements

- Meeting & Dinner
- Monday Psalms
- Resources
 - The Work Of/After Awareness: A 5-week small-group program where we look at real, everyday conversations we've had with others to reveal the anxious beliefs undermining our faith in Christ. (Limited to 8)
 - Weekly Practices

CALL TO WORSHIP | Psalm 92:1-4, 12-13

It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praises to your name,

O Most High:
to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night,
to...music...to...melody...

For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work;
at the works of your hands I sing for joy...

The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar...
They are planted in the house of the LORD;
they flourish in the courts of our God...

Song #1 – I Will Sing by Sandra McCracken

Song #2 – A Thousand Hallelujahs by Brooke Ligertwood

Dismiss Kids

PRE-SERMON READING | Matthew 5-7

Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up on the mountain, and when Jesus sat down, his disciples came to him. And Jesus opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit...the peacemakers...you...others revile...and persecute...on my account...you...the salt of the earth...the light of the world...

I have not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them...You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye'...But I say to you...Love your enemies...

when you give...let...your giving be in secret...Pray then like this...when you fast, do not look gloomy...

where your treasure is, there your heart will be...No one can serve two masters...do not be anxious...seek first the kingdom of God...

Judge not...Ask...seek...knock...your Father who is in heaven gives good things...whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them...

Beware of false prophets...in sheep's clothing but inwardly ravenous wolves...Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father...

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock...

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at this teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority...

SERMON |

In his book *Managing Leadership Anxiety: yours and theirs*, Steven Cuss opens with a quote from James Thurber,

“All people should strive to learn before they die, what they are running from, and to, and why.”

Thurber’s encouragement is not to discover the big “why” of your life but rather the often unnoticed mechanics of life. We are all, and ever, reacting to life: moving away from people, situations, responsibilities, relationships, issues, or opportunities or moving toward them. Often, we are unaware of why we avoid or engage, close off or open up, shrink back or push back, fire off, or clam up. Unaware of why we are not as gentle or confident or patient or courageous or godly in our daily interactions as we’d like to be.

The internal mechanisms of our oscillating evasion and determination rarely switch off or run out of battery. There is, at least in our current moment, always something churning underneath the surface, often unnamed and noticed only in its effects. No wonder we are exhausted! “Burnout,” according to one author, “has less to do with workload and more to do with internal and external...*anxiety*.”¹

Anxiety, that unease of uncertainty of how we will react to whatever comes next, the disquietness of the ambiguity of the little whys, seems to permeate the air of our cultural moment. That’s probably because “Anxiety is contagious”²; we tend to share it with others, as well as pick it up from others. We feed on the anxiety in the airways and carpool lines, on posts, and in post-meal conversation, and offer our own up to anyone with an ear. We react in our disquietness and respond to it in others, so the cycle perpetuates and permeates. Yet this nervous energy we exist within— whether from fear or anticipation—rarely produces something we can be proud of, much less the life we desire.

Thurber’s encouragement, then, is not so much about discovery for enlightenment’s sake (trying to answer your “Why”) as it is about longevity and flourishing. Perhaps a rephrase would be helpful:

“Before the hidden anxiety of this life kills you, figure out what’s going on. We won’t make it too far or too much of an end in life if we are merely reacting (to situations or spouses, events or employees/ers, opportunities or obstacles, family or friends), and even less if we are unaware of what spurs our reactions in daily life.”

Not that we need convincing, but just in case, listen to what Edwin Friedman, an ordained rabbi and family therapist, had to say about his observations for our time and place...thirty years ago:

“I believe there exists throughout America today a rampant sabotaging of [persons] who try to stand tall amid the raging anxiety-storms of our time. [Jesus might call these the peacemakers] It is a highly reactive atmosphere pervading all the institutions of our society—a regressive mood that contaminates the decision-making process of government and corporations at the highest level, and, on the local level, seeps down into the deliberations of neighborhood church, synagogue, hospital, library, and

¹ Steve Cuss, *Managing Leadership Anxiety: yours and theirs*, 6.

² Cuss, xv.

school boards. It is 'something in the air' that affects the most ordinary family, no matter its ethnic background. And its frustrating effect on [those persons standing up and standing out] [the reviled and persecuted] is the same no matter what their gender, race, or age.

It is my perception that this [life]-toxic climate runs the danger of squandering a natural resource far more vital to the continued [flourishing] of our civilization than any part of the environment. We are polluting our own species. The more immediate threat to the regeneration [to an after-Easter life]—and perhaps even the survival—of American civilization is **internal**, not external. It is our tendency to adapt to [this] immaturity [to lose our saltiness and cover up the light]...this kind of emotional climate can only be dissipated by clear, decisive, well-defined [life different] [good works that glorify our Father heaven]. For whenever a 'family' is driven by *anxiety*, what will always be present is a failure of nerve among its [members]."³

Failure of nerve: a conditioned non-response or overreaction to the anxiety and reactivity within oneself and in others, a lack of self-awareness and self-management, is what Friedman contended pollutes the soil of life, those places, and people from which life sprouts, matures, and bears fruit. So, what is the other side of the failure of nerve? What does adapting to maturity look like? What happens when our disquieted hearts don't fail us by determining our reactions but operate as "an early detection system,"⁴ a warning light meant to help us avoid a collision or catastrophe, an indicator to do something different? Well, if that were the case, we might say, as the apostle Paul did, that we'd learned the secret to facing whatever is or is about to be.

...I have learned in whatever situation I **am to be content**...I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:11, 13)

To be content, as you might recall from last week's sermon and this week's pastoral note, is not an appeal to "just be happy" or even a censure "do not complain," but rather a **state of self-sufficiency in relationship with Life itself**. Contentment is the experience of being sufficient within, possessing the ability/competence to flourish in my life, in every circumstance in which my life is lived, because my life is lived in God's life, bound in His ever being, in His starting and His finishing. Contentment is a quieted—non-anxious heart. A heart that knows it is bound and, at the same time, freed to really live. At least that's what the psalmist contends:

Oh LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have quieted my heart, like a weaned child content in its mother's arms, my soul is content within me. (Psalm 131:1-2)

The truth is, however, that we don't always feel competent for the moment, much less able to flourish in whatever life brings. And so we run away or run towards, but never really aware of "to what" and "why" or that our efforts and reactions display a discontented, unsure, and anxious heart. As Cuss contends,

³ Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: leadership in the ago of the quick fix*, 2.

⁴ Cuss, 17.

“[Humans] face a steady onslaught of internal and external pressures we are not trained to handle. We focus on skill development and hone our gifts but too often neglect the most powerful [life] tool: awareness of what is happening under the surface.

All manner of triggers, reactivity, and stories we tell ourselves bubble just under our conscious awareness. This boiling collective blocks our capacity to be present because it takes energy to manage, especially when we’re not aware of it or when we’re reacting unconsciously to anxiety in someone else.”⁵

Again, we are constantly facing anxiety—whether it is yours, or mine, or ours. Anxiety, as James describes it, is fueled by the “passions at war within us,” the elevated heart rate when we want something but don’t know *how* to get it, if we *should* get it, if we *can* get it, and even more so if we *don’t know what it is that we are after* in our reacting. The same thing warring within me is warring in my spouse, my co-worker, my classmate, my boss, my neighbor, my parent, etc. Our issue, the source of internal battles and external disputes, says James (and which Friedman attests), is something happening within us, an internal threat to external peace—which is why learning to be content is a remedy at the source of our issue. It allows our heart to be quieted and thus helps to quiet others.

Still, as Paul tells us, contentment is indeed something that must be learned. We don’t stumble into living content, self-sufficiently in relationship; we mature into it. And our learning begins with awareness. But it only starts there, as Cuss points out,

“Awareness is critical to be sure, but it is *not* the path of growth; it is simply the gate. We unlock it and walk through it, but on the other side of self-awareness is difficult work that brings deeper freedom for us and those we [share life with].”⁶

Deeper freedom for us and others—neighbors, spouses, co-workers, children, roommates, refugees, friends, family, enemies, and all the forgotten. Wasn’t that the hope of a people “blessed to be a blessing” way back in Genesis 12? A people hundreds of years later delivered to a place of promise, a place of Shalom (peace and wholeness)? Is not deeper, fuller, righteous (that is, rightly related/ordered) freedom within our daily living and the daily lives of others the expectation of a society built upon those ten simple essentials, those ten words revealing a life good by exposing what keeps us from it? We spent the last three months trying to make the case that it is so, that our scriptures tell the story of such great expectations.

The problem for the generations between the Exodus and Jesus’ famed Sermon On The Mount that _____ read for us earlier is the experience of a life different, a life whole and holy was a matter of fits and starts, a constant struggle of trying to keep to the simple amid the complexity of life all tangled up in the highs and lows and competing ideas. Eventually, God’s people were utterly lost, as God revealed to Ezekiel and as we saw last week. **No matter what they knew to be true and no matter their affinity for the truth, they were unable to live by reasoned faith; their hearts were lost in battles within and quarrels between.**

⁵ Cuss, xiii.

⁶ Cuss, xiv.

So, to solve the problem, they tried to remove the anxiety that arises when we don't know what to do by complicating the simple, producing some 600 and more rules to regulate daily living with God and others. They focused on "skill development and honing their gifts" of grit and precision, as Cuss suggests we still do. Knowing regulations can never satisfy the heart, they also created stories, new myths to help them deal with anxieties. We're not the first generation to write a book on everything! An entirely new genre of apocalyptic and apocryphal collections appears in the era between the Old and New Testaments. Some of the writings expanded the imagination of what could be in God's kingdom; much more was a diversion from what was really happening within their souls and community.

Still, no matter their dedication and consistency, no matter the vivid tales and masterful metaphors adopted to tell them otherwise, life never flourished for the Jewish people in the centuries between their return from exile and the birth of Jesus. So, when Jesus gives his most exhaustive treatise on the Kingdom of God (life with God and others in the dust of daily duties), he does so **to a people unaware of what is happening under the surface** (the heart of their issues) **nor fully appreciative of the kind of work** that produces the life they desire.

While there is no shortage of treasures to be mined from these three chapters of Matthew's gospel—the famed "Good Doctor," Dr. Martin-Lloyd Jones broke Jesus' sermon down into some sixty sermons, John Stott wrote a two hundred page commentary on what is three pages in most bibles, and volume after volume exists of the sermon on the mount insights from our faith's most influential men and women. For us, this time through, we'll be engaging Jesus' words over the next two months, intending to become aware of what is happening under the surface of our attitudes, actions, and within our interactions so that we might live **simply to flourish**, so that we might learn to live content (competent and calm in our relational self-sufficiency). We'd hate to repeat the history of good intentions. We'd rather be a part of something different.

I believe an awareness of what's happening under the surface, coupled with the kind of work that deepens our freedoms and others, is what we need in our marriages, in our vocations, in our friendships and families and neighborhoods, in the decisions we face, as well as the obstacles and opportunities. I also believe this is what our little world needs the most: a people at peace, making peace in all of the ordinary, everyday places where we make life, good. A people who are not only aware (who hear the words of Jesus) but walk through the gate (or door) of abundant life (John 10:7-10) into the kind of work (doing the words of Jesus) that bears fruit that lasts through all the anxiety storms we and those around us face.

REFLECTION & COMMUNION INVITE |

If awareness is a gate (or door) that we open to help us do the hard work of living whole and holy, full and flourishing, then the first thing we need to do is become aware of our withering, acknowledging the detached disquietedness that chronic anxiety that pollutes our lives.

I will re-read the Sermon on the Mount quick hits that _____ read earlier, but this time, I want you to pay attention to your heart rate. Better because, like self-sufficiency, self-awareness is relational, only actually helpful in relationship; let's **ask the Spirit to examine our hearts and know our disquieting (anxious) thoughts and see if there is any way these thoughts wither our life or another's**, grieving the heart and the good of the One.

I'll read each section slowly; if/when you feel your heartbeat quicken, **whether the urge is to flee from what is being said or attack with it**, stop listening to me and ask the Spirit to show you what's happening.

- What contexts (people, places, situations) or memories do these words and your feelings bring to mind?
- Why do Jesus' words unsettle your heart?

Remember, don't judge what you notice; just notice it and notice that God notices it, too. Remember what the Psalmist discovered in Psalm 73:

When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you. Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to your glory. (Psalm 73:21-24)

It's not about how you enter; it's about being open to receive, to be led. So, let the Spirit of truth lead you into awareness *and* the kind of work that might be needed to live differently, to flourish.

Okay, take three deep breaths, breathing in, *God for me*, and breathing out, *God with me*.

Here we go:

Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up on the mountain, and when Jesus sat down, his disciples came to him. And Jesus opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

'Blessed (already happy) are the poor in spirit...those who mourn...the meek...those who hunger and thirst for right relating...the merciful...the pure in heart...the peacemakers...you...others revile...and persecute...and utter all kinds of evil against...on my account...you...the salt of the earth...the light of the world...

I have not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them...whoever relaxes one of the least of these commands...will be called least in the kingdom of heaven...whoever does them...will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not murder...But I say to you...whoever insults his brother will be liable...You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'...But I say to you that everyone who looks with lustful intent has already committed adultery...in his heart...You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye'...But I say to you...Love your enemies...

when you give...let...your giving be in secret...Pray...like this...forgiving others their trespasses...when you fast, do not look gloomy...

where your treasure is, there your heart will be...No one can serve two masters...do not be anxious about your life...seek first the kingdom of God...

Judge not...Ask...seek...knock...your Father who is in heaven gives good things to those who ask him...whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them...

Beware of false prophets...in sheep's clothing but inwardly ravenous wolves...Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father...

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock...everyone who hears...and does not do...will be like a foolish man...And the rain fell...the floods came...the winds blew and beat...and [that house] fell, and great was the fall of it.

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at this teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority...

I'll give you a few minutes to listen to the Spirit's examination and leading. When the music begins to play, that is your cue to make your way to the table and receive the elements of communion. Hold on to them as you return to your seat and remain standing as we sing together.

Song #3 – Sing Over Me by Porters Gate

COMMUNION with CORPORATE CONFESSION |

Our Father in heaven, hallowed is your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

We receive from you all we need for life today, knowing there is plenty more for tomorrow. We're forgiven, and so we forgive. Led not into the conflicts within and quarrels between, but delivered from all that thievers life.

Yours is the only and forever Kingdom and power and glory; all of which you graciously share with us through Your Son. In His life, we live. Amen.

Song #4 – To Hear Your Voice by Young Oceans

BENEDICTION | John 10:7, 9-10

As we conclude the day made for us, we enter into the work for which we are made [**LIGHT THE CANDLE**], remembering:

Jesus...said...“Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door... If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.