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The World of 1 Peter and Us: 4. Anxiousness and Assurance

1 Peter 5:6-11 adapted from the J.B. Phillips translation So, humble yourselves under God's strong hand, and in God's own good time you will be lifted up. You can throw the whole weight of your anxieties upon God, for you are God's personal concern. Be self-controlled and vigilant always, for your enemy the devil is always about, prowling like a lion roaring for its prey. Resist him, standing firm in your faith and remember that the strain is the same for all your fellow-Christians in other parts of the world. And after you have borne these sufferings a very little while, God (from whom we receive all grace and who has called you to share eternal splendor through Christ) will make you whole and secure and strong. All power is God's for ever and ever, amen!

When I was in high school, I had a summer and after-school job at a factory that made bi-fold doors – you know, the kind that are often put into narrow openings where a full size door won't work. We made plain doors and louvered doors and doors that were half and half. As I got more experience, the factory boss would move me around to different machines throughout the plant. One of those machines was this enormous belt-sander. Its job was to take the louvers that had just been carved out of two-by-fours by another machine and put on a long conveyor belt to be fed into that belt sander's gaping mouth. This belt sander stood about eight feet high and every so often the sanding belt would get out of alignment or it would break or just need replacing. And then the drill was this: if you were the guy at the conveyor belt – whose entire job was to make sure the louvers were flat on the belt before they were fed into the sander – you would stop the conveyor belt, signal the louver-cutting guy to stop, and then stop the sander. You then took this giant 20 inch box wrench and used it to reset or change the belt. For some utterly unknown reason, that wrench was called "the monkey." You then started the sander back up, started the conveyor belt back up, and told the louver-cutting guy to start his machine back up. What you were NOT supposed to do was absent-mindedly lay the wrench on the moving conveyor belt to be fed into the belt

sander.

But that's exactly what I did. And a few seconds later all you-know-what broke loose. The sander made this terrible sound, a shower of sparks was being sucked up into the central vacuum system that moved all that flammable sawdust into a giant bin, alarm bells were going off, and the factory foreman was running towards me. I don't think I've ever again moved that fast in my life. I disconnected the vacuum hose before the sparks ignited that vast vat of sawdust and hit the sander's emergency off button. Luckily no fire was started. Once the belts – now mangled, of course – had stopped, I retrieved that wrench and saw that the sander had carved this huge depression out of the wrench.

That may have been one of the first times I can recall throwing a monkey wrench into things, but I also know that my latest time to do so was likely my email to all of you on Monday evening. And just as with what happened on that factory floor so long ago, reactions to that monkey-wrench moment are similar: in that factory, all conversation stopped for several long moments. There was a collective holding of breath and a massive anxiety that was palpable. But then slowly but surely, the life and work and rhythm of that factory began to go forward again. It is likely the same with us this week. I know that my monkey wrench of Monday evening, after I'd announced to the Ministry Board my intention to retire six months from now, caused similar reactions; I have heard them directly from many of you: shock, sadness, gladness that I will get to now be with Barbara more than once a month. But most of all, what I have heard is a sense of anxiety about what the future may hold.

And that's exactly where we can and should connect with our scripture for the morning, the final in our series on what the letter of 1 Peter might have to teach us. Hear 1 Peter's words again: "You can throw the whole weight of your anxieties upon God, for you are God's personal concern." I'm intrigued with the way J.B. Phillips

renders this verse because his translation shows very clearly that offering our anxieties to God is indeed a **choice**. That little word “can” is exactly right. “You **can** throw the whole weight of your anxieties upon God” – **OR** you can choose not to do so and choose instead to do something else.

Let’s think for a moment about how folks often choose to respond to anxiety. I can think of three very common responses. Some individuals may choose to eat too much (that would be me) or drink too much or shop too much spending money they can’t afford to spend. In each case, the attempt is to drown out the anxiety by having something else consume one’s time and attention instead. The church equivalent can be what one preacher once called “majoring in minors,” that is, picking out something in the life of the church that you do or don’t like and focusing all of your time and attention on it – particularly if it is something that makes very little difference to the church’s mission! The old cliched example is the board of the small church that spent hours debating the color to paint the restroom when it should have been addressing those very serious questions about whether it was reaching the people in its community, whether it was truly changing lives for the sake of Christ, whether its programs and practices were truly welcoming or invisibly off-putting.

A second response individuals often have to anxiety in their lives is simply flat-out denial of the situation that is causing the anxiety. Now, denial can sometimes be a useful **tactic** in your life or mine – but it’s a terrible **strategy** for life. What do I mean? Well, there are times you simply do need to take an evening or a morning or a day away from whatever situation you find yourself in. The best of friends know that sometimes an excellent tactic for renewal is in fact taking you out for an evening or for lunch and not talking about “it” – whatever “it” may be. But denial as a long-term **strategy** for dealing with anxiety is simply self-defeating and the more you engage in it, the less and less able you are to actually deal creatively and fruitfully with whatever is

the cause of your anxiety.

A third way that some folks try to deal with anxiety is to decide to double-down on their ability to control the future, believing that by sheer force of will they can defeat whatever is causing their anxiety. They grasp for more and more control over things and become more and more rigid in their approaches to life. But I have to ask such folks: how has that worked out for you? In the midst of your anxieties in the past, how has it worked out for you when you decided that you would force the future to be one way and not the other? I'm going to guess not very well. I know it hasn't in mine. What's more, if, in the face of anxiety, you or I decide that we will do even more to try to force a certain path for the future, we will also almost always become more suspicious, more fearful, more inclined to see new things as a threat rather than a possibility, more and more narrow, more and more un-welcoming of those things and those people we find to be "different" in some way.

But here's the thing: All three of these options, in 1 Peter's words, would be precisely to give into the devil's lures, and my friends, *we do not need to do that*. Believe me, I **do** understand the anxiety that I injected into our life together as God's people at Platte and Cascade with my retirement announcement Monday night. We worry and we wonder what the next six months will bring. We worry and we wonder what will happen if a successor Senior Pastor is not found by the time of my departure. We worry and we wonder if the progress we have made together towards ever-more faithfully doing God's mission and ever more determinedly seeking to embody the practices of a program-sized church will come apart.

Now, I cannot simply tell you not to worry. That would be as silly as telling you not to think of the word "elephant" – the more you try not to, the more you think about not thinking about it which is in fact to think about it! Worry and anxiety about what the future holds for First Christian Church is natural. But in the face of that anxiety, let me

say three things: First, let us avoid those tactics I named earlier – overreacting, denial, or controlling-ness. They will not serve us or God well. Second, let me say this as gently as I know how: if you are part of First Christian Church because of me, if you have found yourself part of this flock because of what you heard in my preaching, then you flatter and humble me. But if you leave because I am leaving, you will disappoint me. It may be my privilege Sunday by Sunday to offer a word and to paint a vision, but it is this people who will continue to carry out God’s hopes – and I hope that you will continue to want to be a vital part of that effort. Third, you are not alone during this time of coming transition. We have excellent leadership in place who have strongly and unanimously endorsed seeking to call a successor pastor whom both you and I can delight in. And we have a remarkable, Spirit-led, smart and savvy Regional Minister in Joan Bell-Haynes. She will give excellent counsel and will be a good and worthy guide on this journey we now undertake.

My wife Barbara happens to be preaching on this same scripture this morning. But she’s using a more traditional translation which renders that verse about anxieties this way: “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.” Barbara intriguingly points out that the verb here that is often translated as “cast” is found in only two places in the New Testament: our scripture for this morning and in Luke’s story of the Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem where the people “cast” their cloaks on the ground before Jesus to protect him from the muddy ground. And Barbara then says this: *“both Luke and 1 Peter intend to remind us that we come before Christ in humility: as ones in need of his grace and therefore as ones who respond to that grace in praise.”*¹ You see, I believe on this morning and every morning we can indeed come before our Christ in humility, not just in anxiety, humbled by all that God has done with and through First

¹Rev. Barbara S. Blaisdell, “The Moveable Feast: How to Cast,” sermon preached at First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Tacoma, Washington. May 28, 2017.

Christian Church and all that God will yet do – if we will but hang on to that humility and let it cause us to continue to have praise be our loudest note, not worry. For, as Barbara says, playing on the several meanings of the word “cast” in English, “...to cast is to take our fears, our anger, our troubles and to fling them with all the strength and finesse we've got out where God can catch them.”² *Where God can catch them, where God can catch them....*

My boneheaded move with that wrench and that sanding machine so long ago didn't burn down the factory, it didn't ruin the machine, it didn't stop the factory from continuing to produce doors. Likewise, if my announcement was a wrench flung into our life together as church, I am equally convinced that, like that machine, like that factory, it will not cause us to stop doing what God is calling us to do – to continue to proclaim the Gospel to those who think that the word “church” means banal, bigoted, or boring; to continue to be dedicated to mission, especially with and to at-risk children and youth; to continue to demonstrate that God is a God of unconditional grace and love for each and all and that this church is a welcoming haven for each and all – no matter what your race, your ethnicity, your class, your gender, or your orientation. Those joyful tasks continue to await us. So, indeed, casting our anxieties on our God, let us continue to joyfully move forward in seeking to be God's people for there is yet much to be done.

May it be so. Amen.

²Ibid.