

Westgate Baptist Community

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A Sermon by Geoff Wraight

Philippians 4:1-9

A remedy for Anxiety and Cynicism

A man read an ad in the newspaper, "Hunting dog for sale, \$2500.00, but well worth it." He called the number and the man told him that he had to see the dog in action.

The next morning they met and went hunting early. The dog flushed two birds from a clump of bushes and when they fell into the water, he walked on top of the water, grabbed the birds, and walked back on top of the water. The man was amazed, and bought the dog on the spot.

The next day he persuaded his brother to go hunting with him. They flushed a couple of birds and the dog again walked on top of the water, retrieved the birds, and walked back to their boat on top of the water. He asked his brother what he thought of the dog and the brother replied, "So, you bought a dog that can't even swim."

Do you know anyone like this? This is the one who always sees the glass is half-empty rather than half full.

When I was a young apprentice around 1980, I worked in a funny little workshop in South Melbourne for the SEC that somehow had a disproportionate number of strange- eccentric men, some of whom had been sitting in the same place doing the same thing for 30 years. Each and every morning you came into the main workspace, clocked on and were greeted by an old character of British extraction who used to sit behind the counter in the storeroom with the words, "One day closer to death!"

Or that other very popular maxim attributed to Benjamin Franklin, "There are only two certainties in life, Death and Taxes." To which I would add a third, "Death, Taxes and Cynics!"

Cynicism

1. doubting or contemptuous of human nature or of the motives, goodness, or sincerity of others
2. mocking, scornful, or sneering

I think the mocking, put down type of cynicism is often found in people who are trying to hide a deeper anxiety or doubt about themselves. These are people who seem to have a deep aversion to being able to give praise to others because they feel so insecure about themselves and so need to put others down or point out the inadequacies in others so as create some sense of superiority, some sense of worthiness.

There is another sense in which Cynicism is a disease of the heart. When we feel overwhelmed by the evil in the world. When the evening news on TV and the front pages of our newspapers are so full of bad news stories that we start to think that this is a picture of reality that accurate. A sense of futile despair creeps into the corners of our mind and we start to see the dark side of everything. We start to feel powerless and helpless in the face of overwhelming inhumanity.

This kind of cynicism I know only too well and I'm sure many of you do too. I have suffered from it myself.

Leunig cartoon. – "Don't go There"



Anxiety and cynicism are two of the issues that Paul deals with in this final chapter of his letter to the Philippian church.

We have dwelt on Sundays in some passages out of this amazing letter and we have reflected last week on the challenge that Paul brings to the Philippian church to live from the heart. To realize that no matter how involved you are in good causes – no matter how much of a social justice junkie you are – it will mean nothing unless there is a living dynamic relationship with God at the heart of your life and ministry.

In these final exhortations, Paul urges the readers not to be anxious but to bring everything to God..in rejoicing and prayer. He encourages thinking about positive things..

What is he talking about here? Because in some ways there is only one thing worse than a depressed cynic and that is a shallow happy-clappy Christian who is pretending everything is hunky dory and is trying to think about nice things all the time.

The city of Phillipi was a Roman colonial outpost in Macedonia that had a population of probably between 20,000 and 100,000 people. It is likely that only 50 people or so would have identified themselves as members of the church addressed by Paul's letter.

Paul refers to the Christian community as an *ekk̄l̄ē sia*. (See also Philippians 4:15.) This term, which we usually translate "church," had its origins in the political assembly of Athens several centuries earlier. It literally means "called out." Paul's choice of this word points to his understanding that the "church" was to be an alternative society right in the midst of the Roman Empire. Thus, if Philippi was seen as a distant "outpost" of the Roman emperor, the *ekk̄l̄ē sia* was an "outpost" of God's empire.

Thus it wasn't a safe place for cynics or shallow believers to be comfortable. On the contrary it was a struggle to live by a different and often conflicting set of values to the vast majority of the world around. You get a hint of some of the realness and humanity of the community, when Paul addresses two of the women leaders directly to learn to settle their differences. And doesn't sound like a petty disagreement, rather it has the context of a struggle to work out the meaning of their faith and community.

So what is Paul's advice and what might it mean for us today?

In verse 4 he simply implores the people to "rejoice in the Lord always".

Here it is easy to just see this as trying to be happy when we aren't feeling that way. The word rejoice is connected with the idea of joy and this is not the same as just feeling happy.

Paul Tillich writing in the 1950s in a book called "The New Being" speaks about the meaning of joy:

To seek pleasure for the sake of pleasure is to avoid reality, the reality of other beings and the reality of ourselves. But only the fulfillment of what we really are can give us joy. Joy is nothing else than the awareness of our being fulfilled in our true being, in our personal center. And this fulfillment is possible only if we unite ourselves with what others really are. It is reality that gives joy, and reality alone. The Bible speaks so often of joy because it is the most realistic of all books. "Rejoice!" That means: "Penetrate from what *seems* to be real to that which is *really* real." Mere pleasure, in yourselves and in all other beings, remains in the realm of illusion about reality. Joy is born out of union with reality itself.

I think this is what Paul is on about too. Joy is a deep sense of connectedness. Joy is being able to be sad and yet not despair, to be able to hold pain and love, happiness and sadness together.

I will never forget a very poignant moment in my own experience when the reality of this truth hit home. Elaine and I were sitting in a cinema together not long after we had gone through the experience of a cancer diagnosis, and the threat of death and loss had come close. It is a time when the meaning of love comes into its own. The film we were watching was *Shadowlands* – the story of C. S. Lewis the famous Christian author and his relationship with Joy Gresham who becomes terminally ill just as they are about to be married. In a scene where Lewis is torn between his love for Joy and his hate of what is happening to her, Joy turns to him and says, "Jack, you can't have Joy with out the pain." We sat and wept together until the cinema was empty and the staff had finished picking up the popcorn packets..

Listen to Tillich again,

For joy has something within itself which is beyond joy and sorrow. This something is called blessedness.

Blessedness is the eternal element in joy, that which makes it possible for joy to include in itself the sorrow out of which it arises, and which it takes into itself. In the Beatitudes, Jesus calls the poor, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst, those who are persecuted, "blessed." And He says to them: "Rejoice and be glad!" Joy within sorrow is possible to those who are blessed, to those **in whom joy has the dimension of the eternal.**

What does being in a state of blessedness mean? I think it means knowing that you are loved and knowing that that is enough..

Because there is no greater cure of anxiety and cynicism than this deep sense of blessedness.

But there is still a practical challenge here and that is the practice of bringing our anxieties and fears into dialogue with the love of God – and knowing that we can do this in the safety of the that love.

It is then that we can lift our gaze to the world and to others and take account of whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure etc. But again this is a practice that needs exercise and we need each other to support and work at this in the face of the enormous cynicism and escapism of our society..

So to summarise..

The cure for Cynicism and Anxiety is not shallow optimism but a living struggling relationship with God..that connects us deeply with reality and helps us see through the shallowness to the real person and to the sense of blessedness and love at the centre of our existence.

The message of Paul's letter to the Phillipians was to remind them that their community of faith was precious. It was to remind them that through the life of their community they were engaged in a living dynamic relationship with Christ that drew them into engagement with the world around them – and brought grace and hope to all who came in contact with it.

I couldn't hope for any thing more for myself or our church here at Westgate.