

Series: "Valuable Wisdom for a Church on the 'Move'"

Sermon: "Anxiety"

Text: Philippians 2:19-30

RGJRF/FBCCS/10-18-20 **UNEDITED**

- I needed to let you guys know that last Thursday I called Southwest Airlines—I tried to use their website but it didn't work—I called them and I switched my flight from Denver to Tampa on 11/17 that was to arrive at 4:30 PM to a different flight that will arrive the same day at 7:30 but is a direct flight. My frequent travel companion, Mary, and I are still going along with my son Brandon with whom we don't travel very often. Our plan and heart's desire, if no force detains us is to see my parents who are OK but getting older. They actually live north of Tampa in Hudson, Florida and traffic from Tampa to Hudson on Hwy #19 can be difficult so we covet your prayers for that drive. To be as transparent as possible, I should tell you that Brandon's entire family including Stacey, Grey and Graham were scheduled to go on that same flight. My dear companion, Mary, and I hope to return to COS on November 24, at around 10:30-11 PM on flight # 2102 that arrives in Denver at 5:35 PM. Please pray that we have slight head winds least we arrive later than expected.
- Did you need to know this Gresham travel information? Did it seem like it was so important—so critical that all you hear it—that I should have begun a sermon with it on a Sunday morning?
- Please look at the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians in chapter 2 beginning at verse 19. I want to read you something from the letter.
- **READ Philippians 2:19-30**
- No, please let me ask you the same sort of questions. Did you need know this Pauline travel information this morning? Was it so critical that it needed to be part of a series of sermons on this epistle?
- Well, you say, maybe it was vitally important to the Philippians. Well, I would reply, my Gresham travel itinerary is vital to the Gresham family. The change is extremely important because it portends a

secret that I can't even speak aloud this morning that will be very important to at least one person who could be listening.

- Passages like this personal travel itinerary or like the extended personal greetings at the end of **Romans** are fascinating passages. They often are treated as less important content in Scripture –just *relational fluff*.
- Some treat passages like the genealogies in **Genesis** the same way when we see that they are crucial to the true, theological story Moses was recording. Many times, those genealogical passages are the blunt, clear statements of how God accomplished his mission of promised redemption using human beings in time and space.
- I have suggested something to you at least a couple of times, probably many more than that as we have been in **Philippians** this time. The personal passage we will encounter in chapter 4 publicly calling out a disagreement between two women named Euodia and Syntyche is not a less important part of Paul's letter or his theological point.
- I conclude the same importance for these travel plans we just read in chapter 2. They are not fluff. They are central.
- One general reason this is true is my understanding of the inspiration of Scripture means not just Paul but God the Holy Spirit thought they belonged in God's Word. There are no wasted words in God's Word.
- Another seemingly *general* reason these personal words are important—even crucial to the Scripture here—is because God has chosen to involve real people—real human beings in accomplishing his mission. Human beings are personal beings that have relationships with other personal beings. This doesn't change—it isn't meant to change—because they recognize they are on God's mission.

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- Let's take a moment to do a bit of review for the larger context and then ask how these verses containing travel plans fit in.
- We are not doing a normal, *complete* exegetical, theological study of the letter this time through. I am rather moving through and pointing out what I see as biblical wisdom the Apostle is giving to a "good church" who is moving forward on the mission of God. I trust what I have said and will say is still exegetically based and theologically consistent, just not touching on absolutely everything in the letter.
- I am doing this because I believe that Fellowship Bible Church is also a "good" church by the metric of desiring to be on God's mission. FBC is also a "moving" church—things have changed with Covid and are likely to change more with a change in facilities and this parallels change happening to the church of Philippi.
- Change, in the sense of not having what we are used to and not having what we want and have liked in the past can be looked at as a rather mild form of "scarcity." Facing the liminality and ambiguity of the changes inherent in scarcity as a community of human beings, can make different impacts. The losses felt with the perceived sacrifices of scarcity—whether they are real sacrifices or not—can produce, *fear, anger and conflict* as a body or they can produce *clarity, priority and creativity*.
- As with the Philippian believers, it will be our discernment and our attitude that will decide for a negative or positive result from the ambiguity we feel in changes.
- The discernment we need is not a pragmatic wisdom that figures out how to manipulate and maintain a thin *veneer* of unity on the mission by ignoring selfishness or sweeping sin and disunity under the rug with a smile.

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- Many churches spend their energy maintaining this then veneer—this false image of unity rather than face the relational pain of dealing with it—especially in times of change, scarcity, liminality and ambiguity when we all just want to feel like there is something solid about church we can count on.
- It will always be there and always do what I like and always be the same. If something changes, we will fix it and make it all the comfortable same again.
- Paul calls on the Philippians to get below the surface to truth but always doing it in love and with the same attitude Jesus lived by—an attitude of true **humility**.
- True humility is not just an "aw shucks I'm no big deal" appearance. True humility, as Jesus lived it, is putting the God-defined real needs of the other before my own needs and preferences. It is sacrificing a *self-focus* for an *other-focus*. It is being willing to suffer when we don't deserve it for a bigger mission than just making bricks and calling the neat, organized pile of bricks we have made, "church."
- The Philippians can be a "good" church—a church on Jesus' mission--going forward in spite of the changes persecution was bringing. But unlike our more pragmatic American church theology might have suggested, it will not do this by more organized and efficient ways to make bricks that they have used to define church success.
- The overall context of this letter tells me success for this "good" church going forward is still more about the **people** than it is the **process** or even the **perfect plan** to keep the machine going and churning out, as it has been able to do, out nice spiritual looking bricks.
- Now, please don't get me wrong here. It is not "about people" in the sense of pleasing them—making them feel good—giving them a

sense of control by ameliorating changes and scarcity. It is not about sweeping hard things under the rug so that the appearance of unity—a mere veneer of unity is regained or maintained.

- It is about the people in the sense of humbly and sacrificially loving each other even when that love is not something we easily receive.
- That difficulty in receiving true love from Paul may have been the case with the upcoming admonition to two fighting leading ladies in the church. Their disunity was a threat to the mission of Jesus' and worth dealing with as Scripture forever.
- How does this travel plan fit into this overall context? Consider the timing. This letter to Philippi was written either some years after or, maybe more likely, around the same time that the Apostle was dealing with relational issues between himself and some of the believers in Corinth.
- Do you recall that one of the issues the angry, feeling-mistreated Corinthians raised was about Paul's travel plans?
- There was no phone service, email, FaceTime, texting or any other method of rapid communication over long distances in those days. One could send a letter or personal message by courier but this required someone had to take the time and make the effort to actually travel the distance.
- It was difficult to know personal plans and even more difficult to change personal plans along the way. Good news could change to bad news before it ever reached its destination and vice versa.
- Communication in longer-distanced human relationships was an issue. People were human so they, like we do, cared about those they loved but couldn't always find out about how they were.
- The Corinthian believers, with their attitude of me-first *self-focus*, on the mission concluded the worst about Paul. Any difficulty in

communication or change in plans meant he was a bad guy who didn't love them like he should.

- Maybe Paul learned from this Corinthian experience that people can come to the wrong conclusions when they live with an attitude that thinks the worst of others rather than the best. He wanted to take no chances of that with the Philippian believers.
- He tried to explain to the Corinthians that he really did love them and hadn't meant to hurt their feelings by his changes in travel plans. However, their attitude of selfishness meant the facts didn't matter. They were going to believe what they wanted to believe that fit their own narrative of Paul being a bad guy.
- This is why the humble attitude of Jesus precedes this itinerary and later the idea of thinking true and noble thoughts rather than the worst of others is connected with the fighting women.
- The mission is over for the future if the focus becomes how they have been injured by Paul and had their feelings hurt because he has changed his plans and it has made them "**anxious.**"
- "**Anxious**" is my word for today. I don't like this word because I'll have to do some explaining about "not being anxious" when we get to chapter four—but for today the word is "anxious."
- Because human beings are involved in God's mission and because humans don't control their circumstances and can't always communicate everything perfectly, the mission of God sometimes makes us anxious in relational contexts.
- Paul, in verse 28 hopes that telling the truth, thinking about the needs of others and humbly acting on those needs will reduce his human anxiety in this relationship and theirs as well.
- The two women producing anxiety in chapter 4 are contrasted with the two men and the relational anxiety reduction here.

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- Paul will send Timothy and then hopes to hear back and be cheered up because his relational anxiety over changing and even unknown circumstances.
- Oh yes, and by-the-way, what sort of human is Timothy? Well he is a guy with the same humble, sacrificial attitude as Jesus. He cares about the interests of The Philippians. He cares about Paul. He cares about the interests of Jesus Christ. Timothy sacrificially puts all their interests before his own to serve.
- They can trust Timothy to tell the truth about Paul and the mission without relational manipulation, if he does ever get there, because he has proven the mission matters more than himself.
- And there may still be anxiety in the relationship over potential misunderstanding because Paul is not sure when he can send Timothy. Paul is confident he will get to come soon too but he is not certain.
- Let's say you actually cared about my flight itinerary in November—you had some reason you really needed to know the information. I could change it 10 times and let you know in an instant, each time, because of all the simple ways we can communicate. Paul could not do this. This was a bigger deal for them than we immediately understand.
- That is why the Corinthians made a big deal out of it. It produced anxiety and created relational issues because of selfish attitudes. *"Paul, you are a flighty lightweight! You don't keep your promises! You don't even know what you are going to do next on the mission. Get some control Paul. Make a plan Paul and make it work Paul! We Corinthians can do that. If you were a good man you could too, Paul!"*
- Instead of sending Timothy right now with the letter, which maybe Paul knew the Philippians would have preferred, Paul chooses to

send Epaphroditus. He is a Philippian or at least they know him and have used him as an emissary from them to Paul.

- Some message was sent to Philippi that Epaphroditus was dying from illness but before they could get another message there, God was merciful, and he recovered. Epaphroditus knows the folks in Philippi will have had anxiety over this bad news which is now great news.
- So, Paul thinks it best to send Epaphroditus to Philippi so they can see him and have their anxiety relived. It will also relieved Paul's anxiety that they may have anxiety over bad news that is now good news but they can't get the good news to them yet.
- Oh yes, and by-the-way, what sort of human is Epaphroditus on God's mission? He is a human who humbled himself almost unto death with the same attitude as Jesus had putting others first.
- I hope this all sounds a bit confusing—maybe even *anxiety* producing, as you wonder why I don't make it all clearer so we can all have the certainty that we like about these relationships.
- I hope you can see how, in their time, these relational circumstances (which might be no big deal to us) could have produced *anxiety*. I hope you can see how that *anxiety*, if one was thinking the worst of the other person could produce, anger, rejection and division.
- I hope you see how this then could hurt the mission of God to redeem the world using humans in Jesus' church that are susceptible to *relational anxiety* over all manner of not knowing and over not knowing for certain things they want to know.
- The same things that could alleviate problems in communicating changes in simple things like travel itineraries for us today actually add to potential relational anxiety.

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- Ever sent an email you wish you could get back the moment you pressed send? Ever tweeted something you regret and even though you have taken it down you know people have seen it and maybe even captured it?
- In our day, we have no problem with speedy communication, but that was never really the problem anyway—not even back then. Ultimately it wasn't about information but about heart—about attitude. It was about how they thought of the other person. Did they immediately think the worst or the best of them?
- We don't necessarily *communicate* better or even faster. We are just able to expose our hearts faster. This means we can quickly either humbly sacrifice for the mission in humility or make the mission in FBC impossible by being selfish.
- When relational anxiety happens, and it will with God using humans on his mission, we can either speak the truth in love faster or *gossip*, *triangulate* and speak *passive-aggressively* at digital speeds spreading instantly beyond anything Paul could ever have done.
- Each of these three: ***triangulation***—manipulatively working behind the scenes socially to get other folks to validate me against someone else in my relational anxiety...***passive-aggressively speaking***—using my words and/or emotions manipulatively to convince people I am right but doing it a way that I can deny that is what I am doing to alleviate my relational anxiety...***gossip***—manipulatively talking about someone else to others instead of talking to them when there is relational anxiety
- I can point you to all three of these in Corinth in connection with their relational anxiety over Paul. It kept that church from ever really being on God's mission together. I suspect Paul wanted Corinth to be a mission base. It never was as far as we know.

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- I believe, in explaining all that he explains in these verses and being honest that he doesn't have the entire plan nailed down and under control with absolute certainty that he can guarantee, Paul is working to avoid these infecting Philippi any more than they may have already done. It would stop the mission there as well.
- How about us—a good church—a church on mission—a church in liminal times experiencing change? Will there be relational anxiety? Yes, there will be. There already is some even if it hasn't been expressed.
- Can we do anything about it? Can we keep it from dividing us as we face ambiguity and scarcity with sacrifice of our own preferences in days ahead? Yes, we can. We can have an attitude of humility like Jesus and put the other first. However, that sounds like a big general thing that I just can't BE immediately today or tomorrow. Maybe? Maybe not?
- But if you are struggling let me give you a very practical suggestion that we all could follow if we chose to do so. Once again it comes from my "not-always-right" young theologian friend Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He wrote...
- "A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me. His face, that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner."
- What if we all right now made the heart commitment that for the wonderful, liminal, ambiguous, days ahead for FBC when we will doubtlessly experience relational anxiety, as Bonhoeffer suggested, we would never talk **about** a brother or sister to another if we have not first truly—and I mean **truly** talked to God **on behalf of** that brother or sister?

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- What if intercessory prayer, a sacrificial ministry that puts the other first were an increasing hallmark of our FBC? Maybe that is one reason why the new belonging book needed to be done and done now!
- Can I say, no matter how anxious I might be feeling about my relationship with you for whatever reasons I may have concluded— can I say I will pray for you to God more than I will talk about you or even talk to you?
- There's a TV pundit on in the evenings on Fox news that I watch from time-to-time. He has a habit that really annoys me of punctuating his questions with the repeated and exasperated exclamation, "*That's a real question I'm asking?*"
- Let me annoy you? That question I just asked myself and you about interceding to God rather than talking about or to humans... ***That's a real question—both for you and for me!***