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Sermon of May 5, 2008 Dr. Jim Standiford

“AN ANXIOUS OPPORTUNITY”

Acts 1:6-11 1 Peter 4:8-10, 12-16; 5:6-11

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! Thanks be to you, O God, for the new life that we have in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

What situations of life cause you anxiety? What circumstances cause you to get nervous, question your ability, make you feel stressed, feel that you are abandoned, that life is not fair, that you want to give up, quit, check-out for a while, or experience an anxiety attack?

Among the answers most often given are: a wounded relationship, feeling a personal violation, loss of job, facing foreclosure, cancer, death of a significant person in your life, deployment or other form of separation, and financial disaster.

There are many forms of anxious moments in life. For instance, little Johnny and his family were having Sunday dinner at his grandmother's house. Everyone was seated around the table as the food was being served. When little Johnny received his plate he began to eat. His father said, "Johnny, wait until we say our prayer." "I don't have to," he answered. "Of course you do," said his father, "we say a prayer before eating at our house." "That's our house," Johnny explained, "but this is grandma's house and she is a good cook."

Such encounters bring multiple levels of anxiety to just about everyone present.

Or, what about this situation: Touring an asylum a visitor asked the director, "Just what is the criterion for determining whether a person should be institutionalized or not?" The director answered, "We fill up a bathtub, then we offer a teaspoon, a teacup, and a bucket to the patient and ask him or her to empty the tub. "Oh, I understand," said the visitor, "a normal person would use the bucket because its bigger than the other two." "No," said the director. "A normal person would pull the plug." Ah, yes, there are many situations that bring on anxiety. The title of a book published in 2000 by Trevor Romain and Elizabeth Verdick, accurately describes our situation, *Stress Can Really Get on Your Nerves*.

In the scripture from Acts today, Jesus ascends to heaven. The disciples are left gazing up into the sky. Jesus has just told them it is not for them to know the times or periods that God has set. He has told them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, where Jesus was just killed, Samaria, which is enemy territory, and in all the world. Then, Jesus leaves. The disciples

must have been anxious. What were they to do? They were told to give life to others, but then Jesus leaves them. There is comfort here as well as challenge both for the early disciples and for you and me in our daily lives. First, Jesus has just told them that the Holy Spirit would come to them. Also, the main message of the ascension is that Jesus does not die; he is still alive. Further, the angels promise that he will return. In other words the message here is that in a time of anxiety we are to trust in God and what we have learned are God's ways of relating to the human family.

In The First Epistle of Peter we find additional help. This letter was written around 90 A.D. It is a letter of encouragement in the face of what Peter calls "the fiery ordeal." Most likely this is not the extreme widespread persecution of the church by the Roman government, but rather local opposition, harassment, slander, and accusations. Nevertheless, it was an anxious time for the early church. Peter's main point is in his statement, "Above all maintain constant love, for love covers a multitude of sins." Sin separates us from God and each other. Love covers over the separation; it bridges us back together. Love is seeking the well being of everyone involved. Whatever the circumstance, we can disagree on smaller issues, if we can sense that everyone is still pulling for the good of the whole group or situation.

Peter reminds his readers that they are gifted. They have abilities, roles, and talents as a resource for the present situation. These do not depend only on our doing, but are a gift of the grace of God. In other words, we can trust that God will help us in the present anxiety.

Second, he calls his readers stewards. Gently he is reminding us we are responsible for using the gifts we have been given. We trust the grace of God but also offer our own grit, our own effort.

Third, he calls his readers to use their gifts, not for personal advancement, but to serve others. This aspect draws us back to the foundation of love. In moments of anxiety we can find a sense of calmness and strength not in trying to protect ourselves or build our own position but in seeking the well being of all involved.

One can sense the intensity of the people's anxiety in that Peter in the latter part of this passage offers three more statements of support to his readers. In this second go around the first thing he states is, "Humble yourself before God, cast your anxieties on God, for God cares for you." Too often we want to play God and try to control situations. However, when things get out of control we give up and yell for help. Especially in difficult times, when we are trying to do God's will, no one can stand on his or her own power or boast in his or her credentials. We need help and we can turn to God because it is God's nature to care for us. We will fall on our faces if we depend just on ourselves. However, there is no need to even try to do it all by ourselves, God is with us.

Second, Peter calls us to stand firm in the face of suffering. Peter is not speaking of human suffering, which is caused by accidents, illness or disease. Neither is he thinking of sin suffering, which is caused by our choosing to physically or spiritually hurt ourselves and/or others. We might call the suffering to which he is calling us, "Christian suffering," which happens when we suffer on behalf of Christ, as in persecution, or in giving ourselves to be of service to others. Peter is calling us to stand firm, or to be steadfast in our faith. He is calling us to hold our course, to keep focused on our Christian values and compassion, as we go through anxious times.

Lastly, Peter states "The God of all grace, who has called you, will restore, support, strengthen, and establish you." Ernest Hemingway wrote in his book, A Farewell To Arms, "Life breaks us all, but for many we become strong in the broken places." This is certainly true for many people of faith. Peter closes his call with these great words of encouragement: "God will restore, support, strengthen and establish you." As we are called to give life to others, even in anxious situations, we are strengthened for our calling by God's gracious presence in the Holy Spirit.

In the news this week was the story about a softball game between Western Oregon University and Central Washington University. At stake was a bid to the NCAA's Division II playoffs. Sara Tucholsky of Western Oregon hit her first ever home run. There were two people already on base. However, watching the ball clear the fence she missed touching first base. Six feet past the bag, she abruptly stopped and turned to go back to the base. Something gave way in her right knee and she collapsed. Her coach couldn't touch her nor any of her own team members, or she would lose the homerun. So two players from the opposing team picked her up and carried her around the bases. They in effect gave the game and the play-off bid to Western Oregon, but even more they demonstrated the highest level of sportsmanship. Above all maintain constant love.

Bishop Sharon Brown Christopher gave the Episcopal Address at the recently completed General Conference of our church in Fort Worth. She told these two stories: Candis Shannon of Fairbanks, Alaska, was filled with anxiety. She was 31 and meningitis had taken away her hearing and she was struggling to find hope and meaning in life. She found that hope when she began to attend the worship services at the United Methodist Church near her home. That congregation was a group of people who above all maintained constant love.

A United Methodist Church in Manila, Philippines, led by Allen Casuco built their church just outside the walls of a cemetery for the purpose of ministering to all the poor people who live in the cemetery's tombs. The congregation sees as their mission to provide these people with food, shelter, clothing and opportunities for their children to receive an education. Above all maintain constant love.

My good friend, Don Harp recently told of playing golf with a neighboring Catholic priest. Every time the priest would prepare to putt, he would cross himself, and he would make the putt. After awhile Don said to the priest, "I'm going to start doing that crossing stuff." The priest responded, "It won't do you any good." "Why," asked Don, "because I'm not a Catholic?" "No," said the priest, "because you can't putt." If you want to win in golf, you have to focus on the fundamentals. Peter tells us if we want to be faithful in anxious times we too have to focus above all on maintaining constant love, for it covers a multitude of sins. And God will help us. Thanks be to God.*

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[*] Notes: Bishop Sharon Brown Christopher's full Episcopal Address can be viewed at www.umc.org in the speeches of General Conference. The softball story is from *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, May 1, 2008, p. A2.

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