

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario

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“Dare to be yourself”

Text: The Lord is near; have no anxiety, but in everything make your requests known unto God in prayer and petition with thanksgiving. Then the peace of God, which is beyond our utmost understanding, will keep guard over your hearts and thoughts. **Philippians 4: 6.**

Have you ever wanted to be the kind of person who never gets ruffled?

The great psychoanalyst Rollo May coined a phrase “Become a self differentiated non-anxious presence.”

George arrived in New York from Canada and took a job working on the shop floor of Safeway’s Supermarket. One day, a customer asked him where he could find half a head of lettuce and George told him that they only sell whole heads of lettuce. But the customer was insistent and got George to consult with the manager.

So, George, who was not easily ruffled, went back peacefully into the storage area and said to the produce manager, "Some idiot wants to buy a half a head of lettuce."

As he finished his sentence, George turned around to find the customer had followed him and was standing right behind him, so he quickly added, "And this gentleman offered to buy the other half."

The produce manager approved the deal and the customer left satisfied.

Later that day, the produce manager said to George, "I was very impressed with the way you got yourself out of that tricky situation earlier. We like people who can think on their feet in New York!"

Where are you from?"

"I'm from Canada, sir," George replied.

"So why did you leave Canada?" the manager asked.

"Because too many hockey players live there," replied George, smiling.

"That's quite surprising," said the manager, looking angry. "My wife is from Canada."

George replied, "You don't say? Who did she play for?"

When I studied to become an Interim minister, “become a non-anxious-presence” was a catch phrase we were all supposed to understand from the inside out. Why?

Because this is the kind of leadership that churches frequently need during an Interim.

When a well-loved minister leaves, a congregation naturally feels grief. If a minister is let go, there is usually a conflict within a congregation. Some congregations want a clone of the previous minister. Some folks have a difficulty accommodating the changes a new minister inevitably brings. Others, after experiencing deep conflict, want the exact opposite of the former minister. All these wants, and desires can end up putting pressure on the Interim minister to be something other than themselves. And that doesn't work well.

Transition times can be full of excitement, tension, agendas hidden or manifest. The frequent response of an Interim is to become anxious. In a firestorm, if one develops, this only makes the situation worse. Hence the counsel for interim Ministers: “Become a self differentiated, non-anxious presence.” Let's break that phrase up.

1) Self differentiated; what does that mean?

Jesus taught particularity. He said: “Even the hairs on our heads are numbered.” Socrates said: “Know thyself!”

Carl Jung called for individuation. This is the hardest of human tasks. Laurens Van der Post commenting on Jung said: The true road is a hard road anyone can travel and there is no other way. He says that a person who has explored just half of their possibilities is not done. They are to explore all of their abilities. This is truly a religious challenge.

Jung said of his followers. "I don't want anyone to be a Jungian. I want people above all to be themselves!"

The Bible makes it clear, as do the great teachers of the world including psychiatrists, that the penalty for not being ourselves is neurosis, sickness and the eventual loss of the self. So why are we so afraid of being ourselves?

Alan Cohen in his little book Dare to be Yourself writes: "Over years- we have shielded ourselves from the destruction we feared, by covering our true self with plates of protection, masks of bravado and stone walls of defense...At first our intention was to protect ourselves from pain, but in the bargain we kept love at a distance... We have forgotten the beauty of our true self and have come to believe that we are not worthy of all the good our heart yearns to enjoy and deserves."

I once asked a parishioner what advice she would give me as I started a pastorate. She paused, thought for a minute and then said, "The best advice I can give you is this: Be yourself!"

What does 'self differentiated' mean practically? **Know yourself. Like yourself. Love yourself. Be yourself!**

2) Why be non-anxious? Why is this admonition back to back with being self differentiated?

All of us experience what is called peer pressure- the pressure to conform. Once we set out to be thoroughly ourselves, all kinds of people will try to change that decision we have made. And that pressure is likely to make us anxious!

There is a feedback loop here. If we are to be truly ourselves then we need to be comfortable in our own skin.

If we get anxious about being ourselves, we will stop being our best selves. Where you used to smile a frown will start to inhabit your features. Where you used to be even tempered you will start to 'fly off the handle', where once you had great people skills you will become paranoid.

It is often said that we kill our leaders, politicians, ministers, artists, musicians, our truly individuated people, not by a single blow, but by a death from a thousand cuts.

So how do we protect ourselves from becoming paranoid, always being in a reactive mode, always being defensive, or simply withdrawing?

Answer? **By being non-anxious as a state of being.**

Let's look at the text with which we began: "St. Paul says: The Lord is near. Have no anxiety. Talk to God. Make your requests known...then let the peace of God which is beyond our utmost understanding, keep guard over our hearts and thoughts."

Have you ever thought about peace being a guard over you? Do you have a non-anxious guard? So that when problems surround you on every side, you throw back your head and laugh? And then are you able to comfort and heal others by your non-anxious self?

I wonder are we self aware enough to know that when we get uptight, **our judgement** goes out the window? And does perspective come when we get time to think, when we are relaxed?

Ah! If we had only been non-anxious to begin with, if we had chosen to be the calm at the centre of the storm, then perhaps we could have healed the situation, or at least have not escalated it.

So, let's be non-anxious! It will work better for us than anxiety ever will.

3) Presence! What is meant by Presence?

True presence is the aura that surrounds us when we are truly ourselves. We don't have to do or say anything to be a presence in the room or at a party. The greats of this world all have Presence, a mysterious quality of immanence, charisma or quiet attraction.

Quite obviously Jesus had this in spades!

In the Gospel lesson this morning we read about Mary and Martha.

Martha is the classic anxious presence. She is distracted, beset by her many tasks. She needs and wants help. She is anxious that she is not getting it. So, she complains to the authority figure, in this case Jesus, for support.

And Jesus **does not** give it!

He simply reflects the truth back to her: "Martha, you are fretting and fussing about many things, when only one thing is necessary."

Now there is a lot of peer pressure on Martha. There are expectations and she is letting all that in to her heart. She is very far away from our phrase. She might even be self differentiated, but is she anxious!? You bet!

Probably Martha is trying to please everyone and will end up by pleasing no one, not even Jesus. She is the exact opposite to what Rollo May had in mind!

But what about Mary? Mary is sitting calmly at the feet of Jesus and our phrase fits her perfectly; Mary is a self differentiated non- anxious presence. **That is who she is!**

Do we think that Mary is unaware of Martha's fretting? Of course, she knows. She is her sister! Yet Mary resists the pressure coming from her sister.

Mary has figured out her priorities. She gets who Jesus is and she gets what is really important. She sits calmly drinking in the words of Jesus. In this she has had a date with history, that very few had, and she was not about to miss it.

In Martha's eyes, Mary is wasting her time when she could have been helping. But look at Mary! She is the calm in Martha's storm.

Who does Jesus endorse? Does he say; "There, there, Martha. I'm sorry you are so pushed. Mary you need to be a good sister and help her! I'll give you my lecture notes. You can read them later!"

Jesus does **not** do that. In fact, he makes it abundantly clear what direction he favors; "The part that Mary has chosen is best; it shall not be taken away from her!"

What about Jesus himself? Was he a self differentiated, non-anxious Presence!? What was he like when a crisis struck?

Do you remember the story of Jesus and his disciples when they were out in a boat and a storm blew up?

It was time to be anxious! The disciples get into it. They start to bail the boat.

But Jesus remains fast asleep!

Suddenly one of them notices Jesus asleep in the back of the boat. The disciples put up with this behaviour for awhile but as they do so, their anxiety increases. Finally, one of them has had enough. He gets up and shakes Jesus awake, yelling above the storm

"Don't you care that we are perishing?"

And the great Non-Anxious Presence, the Lord of all Creation, stands up and says: "Peace be still!" and there was a great calm.

Joseph Cotter was self described as a professional worrier. He told himself not to worry but try as he might he couldn't get over his daily fears.

He began to pray about how he might stop worrying all the time and an answer came from an unexpected source.

A day came that changed his life.

He was in a railway station watching a train get ready for departure. All was hustle and bustle around the engineer who was quite obviously a self differentiated non-anxious, unruffleable presence.

Cotter walked down beside the engineer and looked down the track at all the red lights.

Suddenly a large light turned green. The engineer who had remained peaceful amidst all the hustle and bustle began to ring the bell. Then came the familiar "All aboard!" And the train moved slowly off.

Cotter did a very smart thing. He paused to reflect on the slice of life he had just witnessed. That engineer had started a long cross- country journey with one green light only. There might be slowdowns and delays but wasn't that why there was a signal system?

Amber lights said: "Reduce speed, take it easy."

Red lights said: "Danger ahead. Stop!"

What made train travel safer was a good signal system.

Cotter asked himself this question: "Why don't I have a good signal system?"

He thought about that.

Then he asked himself, "Who knows the future? Who could see down the track?"

The answer came back: God could!

From then on, he began his day by setting aside a few minutes at the beginning of the day for a Divine signal system.

Through prayer he got his green light from Jesus, that same Non -Anxious Presence that calmed the sea of Galilee 2,000 years ago.

Now he literally does not care about the color of the lights on the track. If it's a red, that is Okay! God knows best. If he hears an inner voice counsel him amber light. "Go slow on this one," he does that. If it's a green, he moves forward.

What Cotter learned, you and I can also learn.

Hear it from St. Paul: "The Lord is near." Who is he talking about? **That Great Non- Anxious Presence that can keep us at peace in any storm, no matter what it is!**

"Have no anxiety but in everything make your requests known to God in prayer and petition with thanksgiving."

Then the magic happens!

The peace of God which is beyond our utmost understanding, **keeps guard over our hearts and thoughts!**

What a gift!