

4th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Surrender to God”

Bishop Frank Schuster

My friends, St. Paul tells us in our second reading, “Brothers and sisters, I should like you to be free of anxieties.” That put a smile on my face because it is a wonderful thought, right? However, I think the one thing that unites the entire country and world right now is, in fact, anxiety. We have entered an election year, there is a growing polarization in our country’s politics, and the world is becoming more violent every week with how nations treat other nations. Every one of us have issues to deal with in our own personal lives as well, whether it is coping with the loss of a loved one, struggles to get along in our families, perhaps we struggle with health issues that we or a loved one may be dealing with, and then there is everything that is expected of us at school or work that weigh heavy on us, the list goes on. St. Paul is telling us this Sunday. “I should like you to be free of anxiety”. I think a knee-jerk response could be, “Well, easy enough for him to say! What did St. Paul ever have to deal with?” That is when we realize that we would do very well to listen to him.

To begin with, being a Christian was a capital crime in his society, punishable by imprisonment or even death. He lived in a society where there wasn’t health care like we have today or social nets. The average lifespan was about forty years. A common anxiety of his day was: how will I get food on the table tonight or how will I keep my family safe this week? As we all know, these kinds of anxieties still exist in many parts of the world today. I mention this because there is some benefit in keeping the anxieties we have in perspective. Nevertheless, all of us have real anxieties that weigh down on us day after day. What are we to make of St. Paul’s advice, “Brothers and sisters, I should like you to be free of anxieties”? What is his secret?

I think the secret can be found in our Gospel reading today. Jesus cures a man with an unclean spirit. This unclean spirit convinced this man to believe that God had it out for him and was even going to destroy him. This unclean spirit disturbed this man’s mind to point of physical convulsion and loud cries. It was of course a demon causing him this grief, and demons are at work in our world today. However, in my mind, this guy could also be a perfect metaphor of someone with a severe anxiety disorder. My friends, anxiety can feel like an unclean spirit inside of us that convinces us that God doesn’t care; or worse, that God somehow has it out for us.

Notice that central to this man’s healing is the recognition of Jesus’ authority. The English word “authority” in this passage from Mark is translated from the Greek word “exousia”. Isn’t that a great word? Let’s say it together. You will be positively feared at your next game of scrabble. Exousia is a word that literally means, “out of one’s being”. If Jesus’ authority comes out of his very being, no wonder the people were astonished. They were listening to a man who had the authority of God from his being. This makes me believe that the scriptures this Sunday are suggesting to us that the secret about how to be liberated from the unclean spirit of anxiety is to completely surrender ourselves to the authority of Jesus. And I get it. This is a very easy thing to say, and it feels sometimes

impossible to do. We would much rather clench our fists, stomp our feet, and live through life with a stubborn illusion that we have more control over matters than we do. However, all the spiritual masters in our history would agree that surrendering to Jesus' authority over us is the only path there is to peace in this world and to spiritual freedom.

You know who really understood this was St. Theresa of Avila. She gives good advice as to how to handle any anxiety this world can throw at us. She says, "Friends, let nothing disturb you, let nothing frighten you; all things pass, God never changes! Patient endurance attains everything; whoever has God wants for nothing; God alone suffices."

And so, ask yourself, what is the greatest anxiety that you are facing right now in your life? What is it? Does it have to do with a relationship in our families, does it have something to do with school, with work, does it have something to do with your health, or does it have to do with fear about the future or what's going on in our world right now? What is causing the most anxiety for you this minute? Now, can we take whatever worries us the most and just place it at the foot of the cross? My friends, have you ever considered that the cross is Jesus surrendering himself to you! Jesus completely surrenders himself to you. That is how much God loves you. What does it look like then for us to completely surrender to God right now? You see, when we finally find a way to surrender and unclench our fists so that God can finally take our hand, St. Theresa of Avila's wisdom makes so much more sense, "Whoever has God wants for nothing; God alone suffices".