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Casting Cares

~~sheep - little slide~~
More than 100 years ago, a Dutch poet, Jacqueline Van Der Waals wrote a poem which later became a much-loved hymn in church hymnals in the Netherlands – the poem's first line in Dutch says, "wat de toekomst brengen mog, mij geleidt des heren hand". In English the poem says, "what the future may bring, the Lord's hand will guide me, courageously I turn my eye to the unknown land."

The poem or hymn became much loved particularly for the immigrants coming to Canada, Brazil, the United States. Any immigrant leaving their home country or a refugee camp for that matter could sense the prayerful spirit in the song. I know for a fact that on some ships leaving Rotterdam, the hymn was sung as the ship pulled away from the harbour. For the immigrants the one line that seemed to hit home was "looking to that unknown land, I am led by the Lord's hand." The song was a prayer for trust as the immigrants looked ahead not knowing what to expect. ①

But for Jacqueline Van De Waals the "unknown land" that she had in mind as she wrote her poem was living with a diagnosis of terminal stomach cancer as she looked to heaven. Shortly after writing her poem, she died Apr. 29, 1922, at the age of 53. The song goes as follows "whatever the future may bring me, I'm led by the Lord's hand so I bravely turn my eyes to that unknown land. Teach me to follow without asking, Father what You do is good. Just teach me to carry the present with a calm and trusting mood" It's this last line – "teach me to carry the present with a calm and trusting mood" as I am led by the Lord's hand, which was Jacqueline's prayer. A prayer to live through each day. Father, just give me strength for the day. ②

"Father, help me to carry the present" is a modern take on what Peter wrote in I Peter 5:7 – "cast your cares upon the Lord, for He cares for you". The apostle Peter wrote a couple of ③

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letters to new Jewish Christians going through a great deal of difficulty in their day -around the year A.D. 64. Peter writes about believers throughout the Mediterranean world going through sufferings because of their Christian faith. He speaks of faith being refined by fire, being unjustly punished, persecuted; having property confiscated, being beaten for not worshipping Caesar – to these disheartened and struggling believers Peter says “humble yourselves under God’s mighty hand that He may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.”

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“Carry the present – cast your cares on Him” Same prayer, just different words.

The apostle Peter gives his readers and us some helpful words on “being carried in the present”. When you cast your cares do it with courageous honesty. He writes in chapter 3:8 believers are “live in harmony with one another, be sympathetic, be compassionate and humble” Be upfront with what your cares are. You should do that with God, and you can do that through the community of believers. Peter comes by this encouragement honestly.

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He wrote about the year A.D. 64 and the Jewish Temple was destroyed in A.D. 70. There is a text in the Jewish Mishnah, that Pastor Laura alluded to last Sunday, that describes a pilgrimage ritual from the time of the Herod’s Temple. Pilgrims from all across Israel several times a year would travel to Jerusalem and they would enter the Temple, likely from the South Gate and enter an enormous plaza, and turning to the right, the pilgrims would circle the square counterclockwise. Peter, himself may have practiced this ritual of worship, before he met Jesus.

Meanwhile the broken-hearted, the mourners, those with illness, or a heavy heart would make the same ritual walk, but they would turn to the left and circle the square in the opposite direction; and if you can imagine it, the pilgrims would meet each other and notice the stress and strain on the faces of those coming from the left.

It’s Rabbi Brose of Los Angeles who writes about this ritual, in the NY Times earlier this year. She writes that “those coming from the right would ask, “what is that causes your heart to ache?” “My father died – there were so many things I never had a chance to say”. Or “My spouse says they want a divorce, it caught me completely blindsided” Or, “We had a biopsy taken on my child’s tumour, and we’re waiting for result”. The ones who were circling to the

right would offer a prayer of blessing – “May the God who lives in this place comfort you and give you His blessing.”

In this house where God meets us, we know that there are church members come into worship with a heavy heart. A renowned church leader years ago wrote that pastors should anticipate that 80% of church members coming to worship on any given Sunday will have had a significant spiritual crisis or stress moment that past week. They are anxious and stressed about a family member, younger members about schooling and friendships that so fragile; members distraught about the church family so torn by uncertainty and division; concerns about a child running with the wrong crowd, and a host of other concerns. When worshippers come here on a Sunday with that care/anxiety, do not hide your broken heart and leave for home, not sharing a word. Don't avoid those who you know have the gift of compassionate listening.

And there are many who come to worship and see the strain on the faces of others, and take the time to check in with these who hurt.....and they give the gift of listening and encouragement and perhaps prayer. When they ask those who are having a difficult day, “tell me about your anxiety, your sorrow.” This kind of care is the heartbeat of living together as the people of God. It is a sacred responsibility to turn to someone with despair and you may be intimidated to do so, but you realize you cannot abandon them – meet them with an affirmation that you care. You can't take away another's pain, but they need to know that they won't have to hold it alone. Sorrow is redeemed in the sharing.

It's more than a Sunday event. There a ministry of listening and care that goes beyond worship. It occurs in Coffee Break, in small faith groups, in walking together, when you have a coffee at Fireside Restaurant. When you hear the phrase “do you have time for a coffee?” – that's code for “I need to have someone listen to what's on my heart.” Make the time then to listen and encourage.

This is casting cares.....this is gaining strength for the day. For the Lord uses His people in this way. And in the casting of cares, they are not minimized, but they are shared, and the burden is made lighter.

The world may admire the tough, stiff upper lip “I’m okay” man or woman who mask their troubles – the John Wayne types of this world. Perhaps you were here in this place when the Christian writer Philip Yancey spoke about his connection to the world of leprosy. Philip Yancey said that “pain redeemed is more impressive than pain removed”. Sorrow and stress acknowledged is more admired than sorrow and stress denied. Sorrow is redeemed through sharing. Sharing your pain is “stewardship of your grief” as Jeff Munroe helped us understand.

This first way of casting your cares – entrusting your pain to the community of believers. There is further bit encouragement that Peter offers. It is this – remember to colour your cares against a background of hope.

Artists who work with oil paints need to prepare their canvasses before they can apply any colours. A foundation compound called gesso is applied to the canvas so that in this way the oil paint colours don’t run into – bleed into - each other and leech through to the other side.

Peter encourages his readers and us to colour our cares on the foundation gesso called “God’s care”. Colour your cares on the foundation of God’s care. Peter goes on to say in verse 10 “God Himself will restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.” The apostle goes on to refer to our Lord Jesus again and again saying, as Jesus suffered for us, also suffers with us.

It needs to be admitted that grief, sorrow and stress have the power to overwhelm and take over your world, your mind and spirit so much so that relationships can become fractured – a couple going through grief, don’t know how to share their pain with each other and can take it out on each other. Hurt compounding hurt. Despair settles in, and the colours of the joys and celebrations of life are contaminated with the colours of sorrow. You become hard to live with, and people might avoid you precisely because you would spin any “good” into a “not good”. You might begin to have an “Eeyore” mindset – things are never going to get better, there’s always something wrong. Eeyore is generally characterized as a pessimistic, gloomy, depressed, old grey stuffed donkey who is a friend of the title character, Winnie-the-Pooh. Eeyore is who is known to say, “I was so upset I forgot to be happy.”

When my brother-in-law was born with Down’s Syndrome, a cloud of sadness and worry descended upon the family. Understandably, it was the early 50’s, helps for children with

3) special needs were scant, to have such a child was a sign of God's displeasure. A cousin asked my wife, "what did your parents do to deserve such a child as he?" So, understandably the cloud of sadness and worry clouded the home. So much so, my oldest sister-in-law asked her mom "Are we never going to be happy again?" For my in-laws it was a wake-up call to recover joy and celebrate successes in care for my brother-in-law. To enjoy outings where the other children would be given attention.

Let me say this for this moment in our church's life.....Let no cloud of sadness and worry, or anger, about our Synod's recent conclusions dominant the colourful tapestry of this church community. There is so much that can be celebrated and what is important to realize, we must not lose this important work of caring others' burdens. This is the ministry of healing. Rabbi Brous goes on to say: In the quote from the Jewish Mishnah there is another reason for people to turn left – the person who is ostracized – we'd say 'turned away from the Lord's Table of grace.' In Hebrew the word is menudeh.- ostracized or excommunicated, shunned in Older Amish circles. Those who were ostracized, shunned, were to withdraw from participating in the life of the faith family even social interactions. And yet they still showed up in the Temple, and they will show up here, they will enter the sanctuary of God's presence haltingly and they too can be asked "tell me, how has your week been, what brings you here?" According to the Rabbi, this teaching in line with what Peter counsels for us, asks us to imagine a society where no one is disposable, or left behind. Even those who have hurt us, even those with views dead-set against our own must be seen in their humanity and held, with respect and care.

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We need to have a spiritual rewiring in our time. We need not focus on policies, but on persons, we can learn to listen to another's grief and sorrow and say "amen" to another's pain and pray for them in their time of need. Because today it may be your turn to hear someone, tomorrow, it may be someone's turn to listen to you.

We do this all against the backdrop of God's care – He puts us in a church family where we find our own spiritual healing as we cast our cares – sharing it with compassionate others, knowing as the Midrash says this is the space where God lives is a place of healing. We colour our cares against the foundation of His care.