

We are guaranteed so very few things in life that it's easy to think an abundance of material things will help us to feel more secure in the face of the unknown. We never know when we might face a medical diagnosis or an emergency of some kind, or natural disaster, or our whole world will be turned upside down, as we have all experienced deeply in the last year and half. Our lives belong to God and we cannot control the actions of God. This perceived lack of control can make us anxious upon first glance especially because our world is so focused on a sense of personal control and autonomy.

Our Gospel story today meets us in that anxious stirring - it's about an anxious, wealthy man and the seemingly perpetually perplexed disciples who wish to enter the kingdom of heaven and inherit eternal life. They want to know more about what these things mean, and how they can receive these incredible gifts from God. Jesus teaches us that eternal life and life abundant are not about the abundance of things but the abundance of love in our lives. This love comes from God and from people.

The man who approaches Jesus in this story is initially concerned about and trying to control what his life will be in the future, in every sense, and wants to know how he can inherit eternal, or perpetual, life. The Greek word used for "life" here not only has to do with the present existence, but also a more existential, future-oriented, spiritual life too. It's life in the larger sense of being a person and moving forward in time - it's much more than just the physical here and now. So this man is clearly anxious about something, having stocked up lots of wealth and possessions and still finding himself needing guidance from Jesus about what the future might bring.

One of my favorite understandings of anxiety that's been personally helpful too, is that anxiety is trying to control and predict and live in a future that's not yet here. Anxiety is trying to control what's not yet here and oftentimes we focus on what could go wrong rather than what could go right.

And Jesus responds to this anxious man in two ways that are important for us to keep in mind.

Jesus responds first with compassion. His first reaction is to remind the man of the 10 commandments, the basis for how we treat others well and have a good relationship with God. The man is of course familiar with these 10 commandments and feels confident in telling Jesus he's lived by them all his life. Instilling this initial sense of confidence for what the man has already been doing certainly helps to alleviate some of the anxiety. The other way we know of Jesus' compassion is that Jesus looked at the man, really took him in, saw him for where he was, and met him with love. He did not judge this man for his anxiety or his wealth or his desperate need for love and answers. He saw him and he loved him. And it's from that place of love that Jesus teaches us about how to truly inherit this spiritually rich, eternal life that is promised by God. And the way to do that is to tangibly share that love first given to us by God in Christ Jesus - we give to those who are poor and in need of any type of support, financial, material, emotional, spiritual, mental, physical - and in that freely giving of ourselves for the sake of our neighbors, we follow Jesus and gain eternal life.

This man is surprised and grieves what he has built up. He likely grieves the time and focus and energy he's poured into building up what he thinks will help him but when he learns the truth about eternal life from Jesus, the Good Teacher, himself, grief is a natural thing.

Jesus then responds to this man, in his grief and anxiety and shock and perplexedness, with a new focus of what really matters in gaining eternal life. It's not about what we've gained or stored up in our physical life here, but what will free us in the spiritual and emotional and existential parts of our life. Of course it's important to take care of our basic needs with having enough to eat and drink and clothe ourselves and have a safe, reliable, warm home, all these kinds of things. But when we work to ensure that all of our fellow siblings in Christ, the whole body of Christ has these things too, we gain a new appreciation for life and what truly makes it eternal and abundant.

When we give our lives to God, when we embrace the fact that God is co-creating and moving and shaping our world each day, when we realize that life is so much more than the anxious micromanaging and escapism we are trained for in our culture, we find freedom. When we let go and let God into the ways we live our day to day, when we truly lean on the promises and gifts of love and life promised to us by the God who created us in the first place, we find joy and life abundant. When we embrace the gifts of creation, of loving relationship, of prayer and meditation and community and simply living, we find the life we seek. This may seem impossible for us in our human limitations at first, but with God, truly all things are possible. They may not always be easy, but they are possible with God.

Jesus does not say that wealth and entering the kingdom of God are mutually exclusive, but rather that it is very hard for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God. This is not because having wealth is inherently bad, but it's about the culture and behaviors around wealth that can make it hard to live a God-centered life. It's easy for our focus to go astray in our current culture, where anxiety permeates nearly every corner of our existence, but a true gift and a true way to calm this perpetual anxiety, is knowing that following Christ is always accessible to us, even in our stray moments. We can always come back home to the love of God and the love for neighbors that we are called to above all else. We are always able to have the gifts of grace and mercy and freedom and life given to us by the resurrected life of Jesus. Our old life of being held captive by sin and death and the powers of this world that threaten to separate us from God has died with Christ on the cross, and a new, eternal, abundant life of great love and freedom and grace is now ours by Jesus' resurrection. Hope is made new in the risen Christ. Life is made new in the calling and promises of Jesus, the new covenants in his blood. And we are able to gain eternal life, to enter the kingdom of God, when we share that new, beloved life in Jesus with all our fellow people. Every single one of us is made in the image of God, and no tangible, human thing, no part of our identity or wealth or abilities or anything else, will ever separate us from that love of God.

So when we feel these anxious pressures, turn back to what more deeply connects you to God. Take a moment to pray, to breathe deeply, to know that the Holy Spirit is within and around you in each moment, and won't leave you abandoned in your anxious stirring. Reconnect with love, love from God and love for the people around you, to find your bearing and your following of Jesus again.

We gain eternal life when our life is centered on the love God first gave us. We enter the kingdom of God when we share that love with others. And even in the moments when it seems impossible, all things are truly possible with God. Thanks be to our creative God of love and eternal life. Amen.