

HOMILY ~ 12th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

JUNE 24/25, 2023

In the Gospel Reading today, Jesus talks about fear. He tells us that there are things we should not fear because they are not important. There are things we should fear, like things that can destroy the soul. Ultimately, he tells us that we should not be afraid of the future. He knows the number of hairs on our head, he has intimate knowledge of sparrows and we are worth more than many sparrows. There is a lot of fear out there as we come out of COVID, so I want to talk about fear.

Fear is about being in danger in the present moment, and it can be very helpful. It helps to identify the danger and either deal with it or avoid it. Say someone is pressuring you to take illegal drugs. You fear taking illegal drugs because you are afraid that it might contain fentanyl. This fear is helpful. It will likely help you to refuse the drugs or maybe avoid this person in the future. There is another type of fear called anxiety. This is fear of the future. This is not helpful. This is getting into the “*what ifs*.” Let’s say I am going on a trip, and I start getting anxious about going. What if I oversleep and miss the plane? What if the plane crashes? What if the airline cancels my flight? What if I get to the hotel and there is no record of the reservation? Now these things are very unlikely to happen, right? You can do different things with that anxiety. One thing is to worry about it. How many of you are worriers? That feels like you are doing something with the anxiety, and doing something is better than doing nothing, right? Actually, it just makes things worse. It escalates the anxiety. The other thing you may do is cancel your trip and stay home. That is not a good result either. Anxiety is different than looking at the future and planning. Planning is good. Planning for your trip includes buying a plane ticket, making a hotel reservation, getting the time you need off work, etc. There is no fear involved with planning.

Now COVID presented the perfect storm for anxiety. Uncertainty drives fear of the future or anxiety, and everything was uncertain with COVID. We do not know where it came from, we did not know how it spread and we did not know how to treat it. There was layer upon layer of uncertainty. The other thing that drives anxiety is called social contagion. We see people around us that are anxious, and it makes our anxiety worse. This was spread through the media. We saw all of this anxiety on social media, and everyone was driven to social media at the time when we were at home with nothing else to do.

An example of this was the toilet paper shortage. This was not caused because COVID caused some gastrointestinal problems. You saw someone at the store buying a lot of toilet paper so you thought, maybe you should buy some, too. Then you hear on social media over and over again that there is a shortage of toilet paper, and they show store shelves empty of toilet paper. How many of us bought more toilet paper than we would have normally bought? How many people have more toilet paper in their basement than they will be able to use in a lifetime? There was so much uncertainty that you could not just tell yourself that these things are unlikely to happen, because they were a real threat. This was all fanned by the media. Many of us turned to worry, which makes the anxiety worse. Worry for many of us became a habit and more likely to be our reaction to other situations. I saw a cartoon the other day, and it was a mother texting her son. The text said, "*Start worrying, details to follow.*" Some of us, who were not worriers before, are now. Maybe this has become your habit, and you need to break that habit and adopt another.

So what do we do with our fears? First of all, you have to realize that you are fearful. Then you have to feel the fear and sit with it. Then investigate it and see what is triggering it. If it is a reasonable fear that is immediate, you can make a plan of how you can avoid or deal with the danger. If it is a fear of the future, that is anxiety. Do you need to plan for the future? Planning is ok. If it is a fear of something that is unlikely to happen in the future, try and stay in the present. I do this at night when I am worrying about something. I tell myself, "*There is nothing you can do about this tonight; you can deal with it in the morning.*" I can usually let it go and go back to sleep. Try to take it to prayer and stay in the present. Tell yourself that in the unlikely event that this happens, I will deal with it. I will not have to deal with it alone. God will be with me, and God will help me. God usually does not just make it go away, but sometimes he does. Sometimes he brings the people into our lives that will help us. Know that God loves you and knows everything about you, including the number of hairs on your head. Do not suffer with the anxiety. You may need to see a counselor. They are usually pretty good at giving you some things you can do to help with the anxiety. Sometimes medication helps. Know that you are not alone. Many people are dealing with anxiety in these post COVID times.

Love and Peace,

Fr. Jim