

Praying Brings Peace – The Divided Mind, Anxiety, and Prayer

Text: Philippians 4:4-9

We Grow Accustomed to the Dark

by Emily Dickinson

A poem written c. 1862, first published in 1935.

We grow accustomed to the Dark —
When Light is put away —
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp
To witness her Goodbye —

A Moment — We uncertain step
For newness of the night —
Then — fit our Vision to the Dark—
And meet the Road — erect —

And so of larger — Darkness —
Those Evenings of the Brain —
When not a Moon disclose a sign —
Or Star — come out — within —

The Bravest — grope a little —
And sometimes hit a Tree
Directly in the Forehead —
But as they learn to see —

Either the Darkness alters —
Or something in the sight
Adjusts itself to Midnight —
And Life steps almost straight.

This poem by the 19th century American poet Emily Dickinson captures the experience of someone who has had to come to terms with or “adjust” to the reality of darkness in their lives – a “newness of the night” that has required a vision now fitted to “the Dark.” I was especially struck by the line “Those Evenings of the Brain.” It made me think of the experiences of anxiety and worry – of how anxiety can feel like an “Evening of the Brain,” “When not a Moon disclose a sign—Or Star—come out—within.” “Evening of the Brain” is an evocative line, too, for how it poetically captures what is a common experience both in childhood and in later life: we often worry and are most anxious in the evening, when we stop busying ourselves, lay down, and

suddenly our minds are exposed to all of that which the light of day has kept at bay. But of course, the “evening of the brain” need not occur for us only in the night; it can meet us any time of the day too. I’m pretty sure that most of the world’s population dealt with some level of persistent anxiety when the pandemic first hit in 2020. That time was indeed a “new night” for all of us, a “midnight” that pushed us to adjust or become accustomed to a “new normal” in the Dark. But for some of us, anxiety is much more than an episodic reality – for some it is an ever-present and sometimes crushing experience that doesn’t leave. As the body of Christ that seeks to be people of peace, we do well, then, to seek to understand, care for, support, and love those among us and beyond us who struggle both occasionally and acutely with anxiety.

Worry and anxiety have, of course, been common experiences for people throughout history – it is not new. Ancient philosophers discussed anxiety and its origins or causes – seeing it as a barrier to the happy life. Interestingly, one of the ancient Greek words for worry and anxiety, the one that Paul uses in Philippians 4, is a compound word that literally means a “divided mind.”¹ To Dickinson’s phrase “evening of the brain,” we can add “divided mind” as another way of describing the impact of anxiety and worry. When we are anxious or we worry, our mind is divided between our embodied experience in the “now” and the unknown “next,” or the future that worries us. Ancient philosophers and theologians, the Apostle Paul among them, proposed several possible treatments for anxiety, some of which were helpful and some of which were lacking in greater understanding of anxiety’s causes.²

Fortunately for us today, with advances in understanding in neuroscience and genetics and in the study of mental illness, we have professionals who have begun to help us gain a

¹ *Merimnao* from *merizo*, to divide, and *nous*, the mind.

² Among philosophers who tackled the problem of anxiety was Epicurus. See <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epicurus/> for more detail and information on how he understood anxiety and its proper treatment. Stoic philosophers also theorized ways of dealing with anxiety in order to attain happiness.

greater understanding of the various sources and causes of anxiety, from genetic sources and psychological disorders to the aftereffects of traumatic events. We also now have many resources, tools, medications, and practices to help us manage anxiety when it impacts us. While all of these various ways of managing anxiety are important and necessary, there is one *practice* that I want to focus on this morning, given that it draws us back to our text from Philippians 4, and that practice is the practice of prayer or as it is more commonly called in mental health sciences, meditation. In Philippians 4, Paul says

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, rejoice...6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Now, I want to begin with a word of caution about a text like this. Taken out of context and presented as an easy cure for anxiety, a text like this could discourage someone struggling with anxiety far more than encourage them. As readers of scripture, we must be careful then, especially when talking about complex mental health issues like anxiety, not to suggest to those suffering that “if you’d only just rejoice and pray, your anxiety will go away.” I don’t think Paul believed this, even though Paul issued the clear imperative to the church in Philippi: “Do not worry about anything.” “Easy for you to say this, Paul, but much harder to put into practice!” I think Paul would have agreed that rejoicing in difficult times and battling worry is hard work. He clearly knew how hard it was to not worry – after all, he wrote this letter from in prison, from the darkness of a cell where he makes clear that he battled his own anxiety, his own “evening of the brain,” his own divided mind.³ Perhaps Paul was so adamant in his admonition to rejoice and not to worry, precisely because he was battling worry so fiercely and figuring out how to manage it.

³ A hint of this is seen in 2:23, where Paul mentions waiting to see “how things go with me,” as well as in 2:28 where Paul mentions his own anxiety. As 3:18 suggests, Paul also shed many tears over the many enemies of the Gospel he encountered.

How, in the darkness of prison, could he draw his mind into the present moment, how could he focus his mind on his vocation as Apostle to the Gentiles, how could he turn his attention to the true, the honorable, the just, the pure, the pleasing, the things worthy of praise? How could he rejoice!?”

We don't know exactly how Paul managed his anxiety, but we do know that he believed prayer was a crucial treatment for worry, a way for our minds to grow accustomed, as Dickinson put it, to “the darkness.” But how, according to Paul, might prayer help if it is to help us at all? Instead of turning directly to what I think Paul's answer to this question might be, I ask you to humor me as I briefly reflect on the ways prayer and its usefulness in treating anxiety might link-up with insights from the field of neuroscience, the study of the brain. If anxiety and worry can be described as a kind of divided-mind or an “evening of the brain,” then how might thinking about our own brain help us understand anxiety and ways that prayer might help us manage anxiety. I have been fascinated by a book by the psychiatrist and neuroscience researcher Ian McGilchrist as I've listened to the audiobook version of it over the last several months. The book is called *The Master and His Emmissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. In the book, McGilchrist compares the activities of the two hemispheres of the brain, the left and right hemispheres. Using extensive research done on patients with different forms of brain trauma, he argues that while the two hemispheres are necessary and work best together, they do nonetheless have different functions and ways of engaging the world. The Left brain, he argues, is “detail-oriented,” “prefers mechanisms to living things,” and “is inclined to self-interest,” while the right brain is more open or receptive to the world, to new experiences, and to interests beyond the self.⁴ According to him, ideally the right brain would regulate the activity of

⁴ This description is taken from the description on the Amazon page for the book.

the left brain, helping to integrate the detail-oriented activity of the left brain into a wider context of meaning and activity. His basic argument in the book, however, is that the Western world in particular has developed a dominant left brain. The Left brain, “the emissary” that seeks to manipulate the world around it, has usurped “the Master,” the right brain. As a result, the brain’s natural division has become an acute problem, with far reaching consequences. Now, what does this all have to do with anxiety and prayer?

The answer, I think, lies in the way that prayer has the potential to train us to become more right-brained in the way we focus our *attention* towards God and to the world around us.⁵

At one point in his book, McGilchrist says this about the work of “attention:”

“The kind of attention we bring to bear on the world changes the nature of the world we attend to...[and] Attention also changes who *we* are, we who are doing the attending.”⁶

McGilchrist then argues that the two brain hemispheres engage in the work of attention differently, with the right hemisphere attending to the world with a “flexibility of attention” that gives us a capacity for “empathy” and “emotional understanding,” and the left hemisphere bringing a more “focussed” and “detached” attention to the world.⁷ He says that, quote

[i]f the detached, highly focussed attention of the left hemisphere is brought to bear on living things, and not later resolved into the whole picture by right-hemisphere attention, which yields depth and context, it is destructive.⁸

With McGilchrist’s insights in mind, I think again of anxiety as a divided-mind – and I wonder if part of that ‘dividedness’ is a split in our attention, where the left-brain way of attending to the world becomes dominant. Perhaps anxiety is a struggle to regulate our highly focussed, left-brain attention on what we are worried about through our more flexible and open right brain attention

⁵ Presumably, prayer could also be practiced in a way that is highly reliant on left-brain modes of attention too, however, this might lead to a form of prayer that is itself too ‘mechanistic’ and seeking control over God.

⁶ McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary*, 28.

⁷ *Ibid*, 27, 182.

⁸ *Ibid*, 182.

towards the bigger picture of the world in which we live. Perhaps part of the destructiveness of an over-dominant left-brain mode of attention is, using McGilchrist's phrase, that it "changes the nature of the world we attend to" into a world of threats that we desperately want to control but can't, and in turn it "changes who *we* are." Perhaps one way of managing anxiety, then, is to address our mode of attention to the world around us.

Now that you've had your fix of neuroscience, back to Paul and praying. Of course, Paul doesn't give us a neuro-scientific treatise on why or how prayer can be an important treatment for anxiety or how it can re-enable our right brain's regulative function. Neither does Paul prescribe one normative type of prayer practice, but he does give us some important hints, I think, as to how prayer engages us in the work of attention in such a way that is helpful for managing anxiety. When Paul says, "Don't worry about anything but in everything, by prayer, and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be known to God," he gives us a description of some basic elements of prayer. First, we are not expected to simply stop worrying and get on with life without acknowledging our worry. When Paul says to pray and to plead with God, he is suggesting that the attention we direct towards our worries must be redirected in prayer. Prayer then becomes a way of engaging our right brain in regulating our worries and our anxieties by directing our attention to God and the wider world around us and letting go of the need for control over what we cannot control. If I were to paraphrase Paul's words in a language that might sound more familiar to our age, maybe it would sound like this:

When you find yourself struggling with anxiety, take time apart to acknowledge what is causing you to feel anxious. Bring that before God. Ask God to be with you and help you to see your fears in light of the bigger picture. Ask God to help you direct your attention away from what you cannot control to what you can control. Ask God to help you consider the good that is around you amidst the bad – ask God to help you delight in something. Even though life's unpredictability will remain, you will begin to feel God's peace guard your heart and your mind.

The way I've interpreted Paul here suggests that prayer is not a way of avoiding what is troubling us and neither is it a guaranteed treatment for anxiety. Rather, prayer is a way of attending to what is troubling us and setting it within a wider context of God's accompanying, supportive presence in the world.

This understanding of prayer is not novel. It's what we do together every week here when we share prayers of intercession and thanksgiving – we attend to what worries us in the presence of God and each other and asking God to hear our prayer, even while we couple those prayers of intercession with our thanksgiving, our rejoicing for all God has done. Not only does this regular practice of prayer work a healing process in our individual divided minds, but it also situates us within a corporate body of care too. Paul suggests as much when, throughout his letter to the Philippians, he encourages the church in Philippi to “be of the same mind,” or to “have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.” For Paul, the church can never avoid hardship and struggle, but it *can* pray, and in prayer it can attend to the hardships of life while still rejoicing in the good. This practice, according to Paul, shapes us into a people of “the same mind,” sharing in each other's journeys, no matter how difficult. Here, prayer indeed can bring peace and joy even in the struggle. I think prayer is indeed a crucial practice for the church in an age of many anxieties, from global unrest and climate anxiety to our most intimate personal struggles. The gift of Peace encountered through the practice of prayer is not a magic pill, it is not a quick fix, but it is a “shield” that guards our hearts; it is one of God's ways of helping to quiet us in our unrest, so that in our trials we can yet rejoice and find that “Life steps almost straight.” AMEN