

As we begin our Gratitude Season today, I want to talk about stress, which can get in the way of seeing that we are infinitely loved by the Infinite Love of God. But there are many people out of touch with that love. I read this week that young people, ages 14-24 are experiencing dramatically higher levels of stress and anxiety than ever before. Reasons for this are complicated, but some of it is due to the negative impact of social media, which is increasing feelings of anxiety and inadequacy. Now, I'm not claiming these tools are evil and have no potential for good, but we must acknowledge the stress they are causing. Social media seems to invite bullying, taking sides, and dehumanizing behavior. It is all too easy to forget the person on the other side. I would also like to say that if you are on cable news or social media all day long, then you may be diving deep into important issues in our world, but you are asking for stress. Turn it off, and do something different for a while. Take a walk, ponder the Infinite Love of God, read Philippians, pray for your sisters and brothers at Peace. Perhaps you might call me a stress avoider, and sometimes I am, but I don't think it betrays a lack of compassion. I think it means I know my limits and my needs.

Stress is a good thing in small doses. And if you are living in an abusive home, or in great poverty or if the northwest wildfires are approaching your house so that you need to jump in the swimming pool to stay alive, then anxiety serves a purpose to keep you alert and more safe. But if you tend to get stressed out and anxious frequently—as many of us do in today's demanding, constantly online world—your body may be in a heightened state of stress most of the time. And that can lead to serious health problems. Chronic stress can suppress your immune system, upset your digestive and reproductive systems, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, and speed up the aging process. It can even rewire the brain, leaving you more vulnerable to anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems.

If we can embrace more deeply the love of God, finding contentment and peace, we will reduce stress, and become more effective in the Christian life. The secret of contentment will be taught us today by a man in prison, in custody of Roman authorities when he wrote this. He had good reason to be disturbed, upset, worried. But instead he was focused on being an encouragement to others. The Apostle Paul never lost his sense of purpose, his cruciform life, no matter his circumstances.

Philippians 4:4-20

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 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. ⁸ Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. ¹⁰ I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹ Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹² I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me. ¹⁴ In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress. ¹⁵ You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. ¹⁶ For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. ¹⁷ Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. ¹⁸ I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. ¹⁹ And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰ To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen. (NRS)

The secret of contentment is in having faith that verse 19 is true – that (singing) *God will take care of you. Through every day o'er all the way. God will take care of you. God will take care of you.* Find the little two year old boy who sings this with his parents on Youtube. Infinite Love surrounds you. Of course, there will be hardship in your life – in everybody's life. Suffering is a fact of life, and as the great book *Option B* by Sandberg and Grant points out, grief is a demanding companion. We grieve not just death but the many miseries and injustices we observe and add to that, our feeling of powerlessness, and it can be overwhelming. But by acknowledging and processing our grief, in the context of knowing Infinite Love, we will find our way to resiliency and contentment. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us, as verse 13 says. Sandberg describes how when her children dissolved into a puddle of tears, curled up on the ground getting out of the car their father's funeral, she sat with them for a while, singing a mournful song of faith, and then said to them, this is the second worst day of our life. We got through the first and we will get through this too.

The book *Option B's* subtitle is facing adversity, building resilience, and finding joy. Our Stephen Ministry group is reading and discussing it. Stephen Ministers are those one-on-one trained caring listeners in the congregation, who are sometimes called the "After People." They want to support you in facing adversity, building resilience, and finding joy. Please don't hesitate to call or email me, if you would like a Stephen Minister. I admire people who admit the need for help. Paul knew he needed help from the Philippians and he is writing to express his thanks to them. While thanking them for support, he also lets them know that he's a survivor. He will make it. He's lived on little and he's had plenty. He does not want them to feel the pressure to assist him, but that their gifts arise from a place of grateful generosity.

Paul has found strength in the Lord to be joyful, despite dire circumstances, so his contentment is contagious. And what is the secret of this contentment? (slide)

1. Trust
2. Joy
3. Prayer
4. Attitude
5. Effort

Numero uno: Trust. The ability to trust is a gift, but you have some control over your openness to God. “Do not doubt but believe.” That’s what Christ said to Thomas, after he acknowledged his doubt and invited him to touch and see. Trust is a gift and a choice. I believe God is worthy of your trust. Trust in God is the only thing that gets me through the difficult times. The most inspiring people are those who have had significant hardship and still trust God. I don’t find doubt, skepticism, or cynicism very compelling. But I’m sorry if you feel stuck there.

Numero Dos: In trusting God, find joy. The problems of this world and of your own very life are not resting entirely on your shoulders. Sure, you’ve got some work to do, but rejoice, that even when you mess it up completely, God can turn your mess into beauty. So laugh a little, even at yourself. Humor is good medicine. It does not always come naturally to me, but I am grateful to those who make me laugh. Dreams are more powerful than facts, so find joy in dreams, as well as laughter, the valve that releases the pressure-cooker of life. Lewis Carroll said that the laughter of joy is in full harmony with life, and therefore is far healthier than the laughter of mockery.

Numero Tres: Pray, remembering to give thanks for all that is good, and there is a lot that’s good about this world. God has richly blessed us. There is so much beauty in humanity and in creation, if you take time to be grateful, you will find more about which to be grateful. In so many ways, our world is better than it used to be. Think of medical advances – antibiotics, painkillers, scans. Think of the ease of communication and travel. Access to information has boomed beyond anything we could have imagined – it’s just a click away. Think of race relationships and equality of women – we’re not yet there, but it is surely better. Think of respect for LGBT persons – improving. Attitudes toward persons with disabilities are far better than they used to be. Yes, even crime in the US is not as high as it was at its peak in the 70’s and 80’s. History shows we go forward a few steps and then at times we move backward. So do not give up and you’re your soul to discouragement in the downswing. Keep living compassionately and watching for the turn-around.

Numero Quattro: Because you've given your worries to God, keep a positive attitude, even when you take issue with something that is not as it should be. Take time every night or every morning to write down at least three things that are true, honorable, just, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. Do that every day for a month and see what happens. Count your blessings and you'll have more. When you're discouraged, talk about it to a trusted person, a friend, a family member, a pastor, counselor, or Stephen Minister, but don't wallow in your discouragement. Give yourself space for sadness, and then pick yourself up and do something, because stress, anxiety, and grief will surely swallow you up if you give them too much space.

Numero Cinco: Don't give up. We may be living in an age of high anxiety, but remember the cloud of witnesses, those who have gone before us. Nobody knows the trouble they've seen, and they are praying for us, and pulling for us. We may not know what the future holds, but we know who holds the future. Press on to the heavenly calling of Christ Jesus, who gave us his all. The God of peace is with you, so do not fear. Keep taking baby steps in the right direction and believing that with God's help, we will make it. By God's grace, we have all we need and more. *(singing) "So why should I feel discouraged? Why should the shadows come? Why should my heart be lonely and long for heaven and home? When Jesus is my portion, a constant friend is he. His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me. His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me. I sing because I'm happy. I sing because I'm free. His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me...."*