

Sermon November 11, 2018
Bedford Presbyterian Church
Mark 4: 35-41
James Fenimore

³⁵On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." ³⁶And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" ³⁹He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" ⁴¹And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Well here we are. We are in the midst of changes, transitions, upheavals, chaos, and uncertainty. What specifically am I talking about? Well it could be a number of things.

We have in the past weeks witnessed the departure of Paul, beloved pastor of 30 years. This is a significant transition for us. Last week we heard of an interim pastor that will be here in December to lead this congregation for a period of time. We are in the midst of changes, transitions, upheavals, chaos, and uncertainty.

Tuesday was a significant day in our country's political life as a record number of Americans voted in the 2018 mid term elections. Billions of dollars were spent for that one day of voting and its implications for the future of this country. I spent much of the day watching the television and listening to the analysis and predications being offered. And as the results started to come in every detail was discussed and analyzed. Interactive maps showed which areas still had votes to be counted and how these areas voted in the past elections. It was such a micro view of each state of each voting district: assessed, dissected and evaluated. We are in the midst of changes, transitions, upheavals, chaos, and uncertainty.

You are probably not aware of what is going on in my own denomination the United Methodists. The Methodists are preparing for a legislative meeting in just a few months that is likely to split the denomination over issues of sexuality. As a denomination the United Methodists are in no way United. The majority of the denomination cannot accept any expression of sexuality outside of heterosexuality. Same sex marriage although legal in the country cannot be officiated by Methodist clergy without the potential of a penalty of defrocking. I and many other clergy have been vocal to oppose these rules and policies. We have fought for an open and inclusive church but it has come to a deeply divided and polarized church. You as Presbyterians have resolved this a number of years ago but we Methodists have no resolution only polarization and unrest. We are in the midst of changes, transitions, upheavals, chaos, and uncertainty.

One of the things I have noticed over the years is that in the church, politics and society in general is the movement toward polarization and a disintegration of dialogue and compromise. Sometimes it may be hard to see these changes as they have been gradual over the past few decades but they are real. We also can have difficulty seeing this as we become more and more engaged in the battle fighting for whatever side we are on. What is needed is greater perspective – a macro view.

My work as a pastor, congregational consultant, and now therapist have all been informed by my work with Bowen System's Theory. Dr. Murray Bowen was a psychiatrist who developed in the 70s a theory of human behavior that is used to help predict how anxiety will impact us and our relationships with others.

The theory has eight basic concepts. I want to highlight just one this morning. It is the eighth and final concept. Societal Emotional Process. Bowen believed that just as families could regress emotionally causing dysfunction and unrest – so could a society on a macro level. Let me read to you what he wrote several decades ago:

“There is growing evidence that the emotional problem in society is similar to the emotional problem in the family...when a family is subjected to chronic, sustained anxiety, the family begins to lose contact with its intellectually determined principles and to resort more and more to emotionally determined decisions to allay the anxiety of the moment. The results of this process are symptoms and eventually regression to a lower level of functioning...the same process is evolving in society...we are in a period of increasing societal anxiety...our society responds to this with emotionally determined decisions to allay the anxiety of the moment...this results in more band aid legislation, which increases the problem; and that cycle keeps repeating ...to the state we call emotional illness.” Murray Bowen, 1975

So let me try to unpack some of this. What Bowen is saying is that as anxiety increases in society we move away from making rational, fact informed decisions and we begin to simply react to others opinions emotionally, which leads to polarization and emotional reactivity. In other words, no longer are we having rational discourse but instead we are attacking one another on an emotional level and throwing out rationality. Sound familiar?

The result of this polarization is a political stalemate where the conflict and the fighting focuses on the easier short-term solutions. The more difficult long-term problems that we as a society are faced with are ignored with only band aid solutions agreed upon.

There is hope for a change. According to the theory when the big problems of our society grow so large that they cannot be ignored any more, the society will move from regressive to progressive. We can look back in history and see moments when that occurred and there was change and hope for the future. The challenge is how to live through and manage ourselves as we live through the impact of a regressive society.

Which brings us to the gospel lesson for the day. This is a story of Jesus traveling by boat with his disciples. A storm arises and he was sleeping as the disciples are basically losing it. They are

full of anxiety and certain that they will die in this storm. They wake Jesus asking him why he isn't concerned that they are about to die. Jesus calms the storm and then turns to the disciples questioning why they are afraid and asking them if they still do not have any faith. Although the story is often held up as an example of Jesus' power over all of creation – the calming of the storm. It is his profound ability to be non-anxious while all around him people are filled with anxiety and reacting to it. I think this is also a miracle.

Anxiety is contagious and when we are with anxious people, we are anxious. When we live in an anxious society, we too are anxious and we respond out of that anxiety often saying or acting from the emotional side in ways that we might not be so proud of. The challenge for us is to be non-anxious in the midst of anxiety. Change, transition, upheaval, chaos and uncertainty are all the building blocks of anxiety. We may see these building blocks of anxiety in our family, in our church, in our workplace, or even in our country and when we do we need to do all we can to be non-anxious.

Part of what helps us be non-anxious is to have the macro view. We can get so fixated on the micro view and what is need to be done that we don't see that our anxieties are distracting from seeing the bigger picture. As Jesus calmed the storm he was disappointed with his disciples that they didn't see the bigger picture. According to the gospel writer earlier in the day Jesus had been teaching his disciples and the crowds gathered about faith and how important faith can be to help us see the big picture. The disciples reaction of panic on the boat was because they didn't see the bigger picture.

I don't think it is possible for us to be non-anxious (it sounds good but maybe only Jesus had that skill) but it is possible for us all to be less-reactive. To be less reactive means that we fight the urge to have a knee-jerk reaction filled with emotion to some anxiety provoking situation. Rather we are doing what we can to calmly respond using our intellect and our understanding of the facts before us. That is the goal which is much easier to say than to live out.

Working to become non-anxious is a life long goal that can have a profound impact on us. I don't want to suggest that the purpose of being non-anxious is to change our society. It might have some benefits the more individuals that do this the better. Rather I am suggesting that for ourselves and our well being and well functioning we need to be non-anxious individuals in the midst of an anxious society.

We are in the midst of changes, transitions, upheavals, chaos, and uncertainty. So as we focus on the macro view it will help us to function non-anxiously giving us a faith in the greater picture that we are truly part of. A faith that sustains us for the journey day by day. Amen.