

The God Who Cares

From the sermon series: God, Our Ally

Text: I Peter 5: 7, 10

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you. ...The God of all Grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish and strengthen you. I Peter 5: 7, 10

God is our Ally; He is a God Who cares. He cares about you, a creature of His making, a child of His love. He cares about all that pertains to your life and touches your existence. He cares about you so much that that which affects you, affects Him. He is not an impersonal determiner of your fate nor an impassive observer of your pain or your pleasure. He cares about you.

He cares about the whole creation. He cares about the twists and turns of human history. He cares about His Kingdom, His rule present and coming. God is engaged with us; He is engaged with the movement of history. In that engagement, He is for us, on our side, at our side.

This has been emphasized from various angles in this series of messages. The focus today is on the personal dimension of God's relationship to us. The message is a personal address to you. God cares for you. He enters into healing closeness with His people. He is our Ally.

The text is from the first letter of Peter - a simple, concise imperative with a beautiful promise -

*Cast all your anxieties on him (the imperative);
For he cares about you (the promise).*

Let us begin with the promise declared in the text: *God cares about you.*

That simple declaration contains a whole world and life view of things. It is a faith statement. It affirms a total perspective on the cosmos, history and human

existence. It is a statement about the nature of God and the meaning of life. All of that is embraced in the promise of our text that God cares about you.

Let me remind you of the place we left off in the last message - the watershed of faith decision - There is No one, or There is Someone.

Both alternatives, as I indicated last week, are faith decisions. If you want to study the question in depth, I would refer you to Hans Küng's great study on the question of God in the thought of the last two centuries, *Does God Exist?* Küng cites one of the leading logicians and epistemologists of our time, Wolfgang Stegmüller, who asserts:

The academic expert, concentrated on his special field (mathematics, history, natural science,) does not like to be told that *basic assumptions of his thinking are metaphysical* in character; the metaphysician does not like to be told that *his mental activity rests on a prerational, premordial decision*; philosophers of all types - apart from skeptics - do not like to be told that *the kinds of skepticism that are to be taken seriously are irrefutable*; and skeptics themselves, of all shades, do not like to admit that *they cannot prove their standpoint*. Such a complex assessment more or less provokes the indignant protest: "This cannot possibly be your last word. One way or another, there must be a solution of some kind." To which I can only reply: "The solution is in your hands, at any time. Make up your mind. Decide." (*Metaphysik, Skepsis, Wissenschaft*, pp. 1-2)

Without belaboring this point, I do think it is important for us who have decided to believe in God to know that one can also decide not to believe in God, but in both cases it is a faith decision. We are the people who have decided to believe in God. Thus we have Someone, not No one. That is a fundamental life decision.

But having made that fundamental decision, we still have to determine the nature of the "Someone" to whom we look and before whom we bow.

Stoicism appeared in Greece in the Fourth Century B.C. and continued to find expression into the Roman period into the Second Century A.D. At its center, it was Pantheistic, believing that God was the principle of Reason that permeated all reality. The Cosmos was a vast machine grinding on its way according to the Divine Logos, the Divine Rationality. The individual found his peace in bowing to his fate. At the heart of things was not a heart, but a principle of reason, impersonal, unfeeling, untouched by the pain and pleasure of humankind. We might call this view of things fatalistic because whatever will be, will be. The world was not seen as capricious and arbitrary; it was moving rationally, but without a Personal Center. Perhaps we could say there was *Something*, but not *Someone*.

Stoicism produced strong persons. We still use the term "stoic" to describe someone who bears unflinchingly life's adversity. A dash of stoicism would do us

all good. However, we must recognize here a world and life view which teaches fortitude in the face of whatever happens because of a belief in a cosmic determinism, a universe permeated by a divine principle but wholly indifferent to the human cry, be it an anguished prayer or a joyful exclamation.

Sometimes we understand a teaching best by setting it in contrast to another. Our text makes a great claim, which is quite different from the stoic view which says that at the heart of things is not Someone, but Something – an impersonal principle of Reason.

Our text claims that at the heart of things is not Something, but Someone - a loving, gracious Presence. He cares about you.

Care is an interesting word. Henri Nouwen in his meditation, *Out Of Solitude*, points out the ambivalence of the word. For example, if one says, "I will take care of him!" it is probably the announcement of an impending attack rather than an expression of tender compassion - but it could be either.

The word "care" has also come to be used as an expression of apathy and indifference. "I don't care." Given various alternatives, one may simply shrug one's shoulders and say, "I don't care." That may mean all alternatives are equally satisfactory, but the "I don't care" usage has come to mean not infrequently "I'm really not interested in any alternative - it doesn't matter to me."

But, as Nouwen points out, care in its original and deepest sense has nothing to do with indifference and apathy and certainly not with belligerence. The root of care is in the Gothic, *Kara* meaning "lament." He writes:

The basic meaning of care is: to grieve, to experience sorrow, to cry out with. (p. 340)

Nouwen declares,

I am very much struck by this background of the word care because we tend to look at caring as an attitude of the strong toward the weak, of the powerful toward the powerless ... we feel quite uncomfortable with an invitation to enter into someone's pain before doing something about it. (p. 34)

Yet, he continues, who really helps us? What kinds of persons make a difference? Is it not, Nouwen asks,

Those who, instead of giving much advice, solutions, cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who

can tolerate not-knowing, not-curing, not-healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is the friend who cares. (Ibid.)

Thus the friend who cares is not the one with the ready solution, the quick fix, the explanation for it all, but precisely the one who is present with us, present to us, owning his own powerlessness and lack of simple answers. To be present with another in their pain is often avoided and evaded by us. Nouwen is quite right when he says,

Our tendency is to run away from the painful realities or to try to change them as soon as possible. But cure without care makes us into rulers, controllers, manipulators, and perverts a real community from taking shape. (p. 36)

Nouwen is speaking about human community, human caring, but what he says of the horizontal relationship, person-to-person, sheds great light on the care of God for His people. Our text affirms, "*He cares about you.*" That contains a whole world and life view; that claims there is Someone; that Someone cares.

That care is the opposite of apathy and indifference. That care is not manipulative and controlling. That care is a loving, gracious Presence with us in the pain and pleasure of our human existence.

Many times we might wish that the God Who cares about us would show His hand, intervene, demonstrably move things around to fix matters for us. We would like God to be a manipulator, controlling things from His throne room beyond the ambiguity of history's drama. A not infrequent cry of anguish is, "Why don't you do something?"

The people to whom Peter wrote were enduring persecution and knew great suffering and hardship. I am sure they would not have been offended at God's moving in on their situation even if it did infringe on the arena of freedom He carved out for the drama of history.

But just here the insight Nouwen shares on the nature of care illumines the care of God for His people.

To cure without care is to do violence to the subject of the cure. That is not God's mode of operation. He cares; that means He grieves, experiences sorrow, cries out with. Speaking of Jesus who is the reflection of the heart of God, the writer to the Hebrews says,

For we have not a high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities... (4:15)

Stated positively: He is touched. He is affected by that which affects us.

Again, let me stress that our text contains a fundamental world and life view. There is not No one, but Someone; not Something, but Someone; not a manipulative controller, but a loving, gracious Presence.

M. Scott Peck is a psychiatrist. He wrote a book in 1978 entitled, *The Road Less Traveled*. In that book he speaks of God and of Grace, although at the time he was not consciously a Christian. The response to the book made him examine the Christian Faith and he received baptism. He begins his book with the straightforward statement,

Life is difficult.

He claims that most of us do not recognize this fact, but rather,

... moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties as if life were generally easy, as if life *should* be easy. (p. 15)

He writes about the disciplines by which the array of problems life presents can be handled. He writes about Love and Growth and Religion and then, in the final quarter of the book, he writes about Grace. His insights are so fascinating because he came to them from long experience as a psychotherapist. From his experience He came to believe in

a powerful force originating outside of human consciousness which nurtures the spiritual growth of human beings. (p. 260)

The religious, he explains, ascribe the origins of this grace to God. He calls the force love, but then asks where love comes from and his answer is from God.

To explain the miracles of grace and evolution, we hypothesize the existence of a God who wants us to grow - a God who loves us. To many this hypothesis seems too simple, too easy, too much like fantasy; childlike and naive. But what else do we have? (p. 269)

I cannot develop here the extended argument of Peck and his purpose is different from mine in this message. But his final word expresses vividly what I would express from our text and I find it fascinating that the truth of the text coincides with the data gathered by a contemporary psychiatrist prior to his conscious Christian commitment. He writes,

The fact that there exists beyond ourselves and our conscious will a powerful force that nurtures our growth and evolution is enough to turn our notions of self-insignificance topsy-turvy. For the existence of this force (once we perceive it) indicates with incontrovertible certainty that our human spiritual growth is of the utmost to something greater than ourselves. This something we call God. The existence of grace is *prima*

facie evidence not only of the reality of God but also of the reality that God's will is devoted to the growth of the individual human spirit. What once seemed to be a fairy tale turns out to be the reality. We live our lives in the eye of God, and not at the periphery but at the center of His vision, His concern. It is probably that the universe as we know it is but a simple stepping-stone toward the entrance to the Kingdom of God. (p. 312)

Again, Peck's purposes are different in his book than mine in this message, but his discovery of that positive, nurturing force from beyond ourselves – in a word, his discovery of grace – is the heart of that reality to which the text points.

God cares about you. That means that Reality is benevolent. That means that in the human experience with joy and sorrow, victory and defeat, agony and ecstasy, there is a loving, gracious Presence that undergirds us, overshadows us, nurtures and sustains us.

The text contains this promise: *God cares about you.*

The text contains an imperative: Cast your anxieties upon him.

We could translate this directive with the word "cares", thus achieving a beautiful parallelism, *Cast your cares ... He cares...*

The words in the Greek language are not the same, however, just as their meanings are not the same in English. The "cares" of the first part of the text are anxieties, worries; it refers to anxious caring, the exercise in futility in which we all engage when we worry about things beyond our control.

The Greek word *Merimna* comes from a verbal root which means "to divide." Anxiety distracts and divides the mind so that there can be no peace of mind, no wholeness. The instruction of the text then is to take those matters, which are eating away at us like an acid dissolving our peace and serenity, and handle them up and throw on God. The tense of the verb to cast is *aorist* in Greek, which speaks of a single decisive action. Clearly, Peter is pointing to a conscious, deliberate action. The problem with anxiety is that it is a vague dis-ease whose cause (or causes) are not always readily apparent. Peter would counsel us to set down and determine to the extent possible what it is that is jabbing away at our peace of mind, what it is that is "eating away" at us. Once determined, "pitch it," turn it over to God.

Such an imperative is found elsewhere in Scripture. The Psalmist's word is perhaps being cited here by Peter:

Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you. (Psalm 55:22)

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, taught us,

... put away anxious thoughts ...

...do not be anxious about tomorrow ... (Matthew 6:25, 34)

St. Paul wrote,

...have no anxiety, but in everything make your requests known to God in prayer and petition with thanksgiving. Then the peace of God, which is beyond our utmost understanding will keep guard over your hearts and your thoughts, in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4: 6-7)

Of course, the fact that these biblical references can be lined up does not make the accomplishment of the action any easier. Indeed, just the bold imperative, "Stop worrying!" can increase anxiety and we must be sensitive when dealing with others caught up in anxious care that we do not add to the load of their care, guilt because they are worrying and not trusting.

But this message has as its aim to point to the possibility of peace of mind and a restful heart not simply by offering the imperative, "Cast your anxiety on him," but by lifting up the promise that grounds the imperative, namely, "because He cares about you."

The imperative calls for a conscious, deliberate action - a decision. But it is not an act in isolation, but an action on the basis of a new vision of reality.

That is why I began with the promise rather than the imperative even though that reverses the order of the text. If once the promise sinks into our minds and filters down to our hearts, then we begin to see reality as it is; then we gain a fundamental insight into the nature of God, of human existence, of the meaning of the world and history. Then we begin to glimpse the Truth that we are undergirded, overshadowed, loved and graced.

Then we can realize that life is difficult but precisely in the difficulties of life we are being spiritually trained and disciplined, prepared for a fuller, richer existence here and now and for fullness of life in the presence of the Eternal God. The imperative then becomes a real possibility for all of us once we see the truth of our situation. Then we can act on the text and *turn our cares into prayers*.

We are not alone. We are not shut up to our own resources and ingenuity. There is Someone. That Someone cares about us. His is a loving, gracious Presence. Communion is invited. Conversation is natural. Our cares become prayers and the consequence of prayer is peace.

Prayer is not talking to one's self. It is conversation with Someone Who cares, that is, Who is present to us, present with us, in tune, in touch, feeling what we feel.

A Methodist Bishop of the last century, Bishop Quayle, tells of a time he sat up into the night worrying about the Church. There were so many cares that weighed down that he could not sleep, but simply sat there exhausted, full of anxiety. Then he says it was as if a voice spoke, the voice of God, saying,

"You can go to bed now, Quayle, I'll sit up the rest of the night."

Have you ever known such a moment when the load of care was suddenly lightened in the presence of God's loving, gracious presence? Such a moment can change one's life forever.

We have heard the promise. We have heard the imperative.

Let me close with the prelude to both. Peter enjoins those to whom he wrote who were in the heat of battle:

Humble yourselves...under God's mighty hand, and he will lift you up in due time. (1 Peter 5: 6)

That is the key. Have you humbled yourself under God's mighty hand? That is often where the battle lies. Life can be cruel and tragic and sometimes it is like swimming through asphalt, but we think we have to do it on our own. With Henley in his poem of defiant independence we may be "bloodied, but unbowed."

We make it so difficult for ourselves. We fret and grow frustrated, struggle and complain and just when we think we have made it, the bottom falls out or it all goes up in smoke.

Why do we fight the God Who is our Ally? Why do we flee that gracious Presence? Why do we resist yielding to Him Whose service is perfect freedom, Whose fellowship is perfect peace?

Dorothea Day took Henley's poem and wrote its counterpoint:

Out of the light that dazzles me,
Bright as the sun from pole to pole,
I thank the God I know to be
For Christ - the Conqueror of my soul.

Since His the sway of circumstance
I would not wince, nor cry aloud.
Under that rule which men call chance,
My head, with joy, is humbly bowed.

The outcome of such humbling of oneself beneath the mighty hand of God is a sense of freedom and release, a sense of being undergirded, overshadowed. Then one moves on taking life one day at a time, tending to those things that are within

one's competency and leaving to God the major issues which all the anxiety in the world cannot alter or control anyway. And you approach life with confidence, from a position of strength, knowing that the God of all grace, Who called you into His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself, after your brief suffering, restore, establish and strengthen you on a firm foundation.

Therefore - To Him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Amen, indeed, so let it be. The Truth is simply this:

God is our Ally.

He cares about you!

Therefore, humble yourself.

Cast your anxieties on Him and rest in His loving, gracious Presence.

References:

Henri Nouwen. *Out Of Solitude*. Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1974.

M. Scott Peck. *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*. Touchstone, 1978.