

Two women were sitting next to each other at a bar. After a while, one looks at the other and says, "I can't help but think, from listening to you, that you're from Ireland." The other woman responds proudly, "Yes, I sure am!" The first one says, "So am I! And where about in Ireland are ya from?" The other woman answers, "I'm from Dublin, I am." The first one responds, "So am I! And what street did you live on in Dublin?"

The other woman says, "A lovely little area. It was in the west end. I lived on Warbury Street in the old central part of town." The first one says, "Faith and begorrah it's a small world. So did I! And what school did ya go to?" The other woman answers, "Well now, I went to Holy Heart of Mary, of course." The first one gets really excited and says, "And so did I! Tell me, what year did you graduate?"

The other woman answers, "Well, now, let's see. I graduated in 1964." The first woman exclaims, "The Good Lord must be smiling down upon us! I can hardly believe our good luck at winding up in the same pub tonight! Can you believe it? I graduated from Holy Heart of Mary in 1964 me self!"

About this time, Michael walks into the bar, sits down, and orders a beer. Brian, the bartender, walks over to Michael shaking his head, and mutters, "It's going to be a long night tonight." Michael asks, "Why do you say that, Brian?" Brian answers, "The Murphy twins are here again!"

I'm shifting gears a bit today – I want to focus on our 2nd reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians. "Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." It sounded to me like the perfect words for us in the 7th month of this pandemic. And we have to remind ourselves that Paul was no Polyanna. He wrote this letter under house arrest in Rome. He was writing to his friends in the church in Philippi, a church that he and Silas founded about 10 years earlier. Philippi held both fond and bitter memories for Paul. At Philippi Paul and Silas were flogged and imprisoned. They succeeded in starting a church, but at great cost to themselves.

It is now ten years later. Paul is chained to a Roman guard day and night. He does not know when the unpredictable Roman emperor Nero will have him called out and put to death. And yet, Paul writes this joyful, hopeful letter to the Philippians. It is an amazing letter for a man who had experienced so much opposition and hardship. It is a letter that brims with hope and confidence. It also gives us insight into Paul's heart and soul during this difficult time. "Have no anxiety at all, but in prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God." As I mentioned -- a Roman soldier was chained to Paul day and night. These soldiers were rotated on a regular basis, perhaps as often as every 6 hours. What do we think Paul did with those hours of confinement? At least part of the time he was talking to these young soldiers about Christ. We know this because this letter ends with these words: "All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household" (4:22). There were Christians in Caesar's pagan household? Where did THEY come from? They came from this man Paul's irrepressible desire to share Christ. And his example of how faith looks in a time of anxiety -- and suffering. (DYNAMIC PREACHING, December 2005, pages not cited) So that was point 1, a bit of background.

Second, some of you may know there is a Bible App by a company called YouVersion which has 400 million users worldwide. Every year the producers of this app announce the most popular Bible verse as chosen by its readers' searches. Last year, the most popular verse was this verse from our epistle today. Here is the New Living Translation: "Don't worry about anything; instead pray about everything. Tell God what you

need and thank Him for all He has done.” This verse is written as a command. This is how we are to live. “Don’t worry about anything; instead pray about everything.”

Let’s tease this out a bit. We could ask this question: If there is a God – which there is – and if that God is all-powerful – which He is – and if He is the embodiment of love – which He is – then what in the world do we have to worry about? Listen – I’m talking to me as much as to everyone else! Worry comes from 2 misconceptions. The first is that God’s character and God’s purposes cannot be trusted. God’s character consists of goodness and love. When we doubt God’s goodness and His love and then doubt His plans and purposes for us, then we get twisted up in worry and anxiety.

This is particularly true in times of disappointment and heartbreak. Worry says such things as, “God could not possibly be in this situation. He could not be walking with me through this. He could not be teaching me anything through this. And He could not possibly heal my heart from this.” And when we can’t see God in our circumstances, then we lose hope. Someone wrote: “Don’t let your worries get the best of you. Remember, Moses started out as a basket case!” There is a story of a man who had a flat tire on a country road. After finding he had no jack, he began walking, hoping to find a nearby farmer who would help him. It was getting dark and the crickets were getting louder. As he walked the overgrown road, he began to throw the dice of worry in his mind: What if the farmer’s not home? What if he is and won’t let me use his jack? What if he won’t let me use his phone? What if he is frightened of me? I never did anything to him! Why won’t he just let me use his phone?! By the time he knocked on the farmer’s door, he was so preoccupied with what could go wrong that when the friendly old man answered, the man bellowed, “Well you can just keep your blasted jack!” (adapted from Mark Nepo, *THE BOOK OF AWAKENING*, p. 28)

The poet Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: What lies behind us/ and what lies before us/ are tiny matters/ compared to what lies within us. Hope is a decision, a stance, a conviction regardless of our external circumstances at any given moment.

Bethany Hamilton began surfing as a child, and she believed that God was calling her to a career as a professional surfer. And there was no doubt she had the talent. At one time, she was ranked as the #1 amateur teen surfer in Hawaii where they know a thing or 2 about surfing. But at age 13, Bethany was attacked by a tiger shark while on her surfboard. She survived the attack but lost her left arm just below the shoulder. Most of us would be devastated if we suffered a disabling injury – especially one that could end our life’s dream. But Bethany did not lose her faith. She believed God could work through her pain and disability. Instead of looking inward and letting fear dominate her thoughts, Bethany decided to look for ways to help others. For example, soon after the attack, she began to raise money to restore a man’s eyesight. While visiting New York City, she gave her ski coat to a homeless girl. When asked about the gift, she said she had more than she needed in life. Bethany’s pastor said, “She’s looking forward to the future. She’s asking herself, ‘How can I show the world I still have a life, that I enjoy my life, and that my life is filled with joy?’ She has an underlying trust that God is taking care of her.” Notice that – she has “an underlying trust that God is taking care of her.” That’s the first instruction for walking the path to joy. Stop worrying. God is taking care of us. Trust Him.

The second instruction for walking the path to joy is to develop a gratitude attitude. Notice that 6th verse again: “Don’t worry about anything; instead pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank Him for all He has done.” At meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous, people frequently conclude an account of their painful struggles with a clear statement of gratitude: “I’m so grateful!” To those who are unfamiliar with 12-Step spirituality, this seems to make no sense. How can they be grateful for the pain and suffering brought about by their addictions? Why are they not feeling frustration, anger, and hurt that they have had to

encounter so many obstacles in their life? Experienced addiction counselor and pastoral theologian Patricia Nanoff explains what makes recovering alcoholics grateful: “The answer lies in the shift in attitude that takes place in recovery.....No one has a barrier-free life. In recovery we learn to appreciate the very obstacles that used to frustrate us and rob us of our serenity.”

This appreciation stems from a trusting faith that with God’s grace what once stood as roadblocks on our journey can be turned into pathways of possibilities. Gratitude wells in the hearts of ‘grateful alcoholics’ for the simple fact that they are alive and can tell their story, whereas once their out-of-control drinking could have, at any time, caused death and devastation. In the language of biblical spirituality, this basic attitudinal change is called METANOIA, a change of mind, a change of heart, a transformation in the way we perceive and respond to life. This is the core wisdom of 12-Step spirituality -- a genuine conversion of heart.

But what is true for grateful alcoholics is true for all of us. As Thomas Keating wisely states, “In this life, happiness is rooted in our basic attitude toward reality,” contentment with life deepens to the extent that we view our lives with gratitude. Thus, a spirituality of gratitude fosters an ongoing conversion of heart that moves us from feeling entitled to everything we have to feeling grateful for the gift-nature of everything, from needing to control everything in our life to a peaceful acceptance of our reality, even when it does not conform to our desires. The well-known Serenity Prayer provides wise guidance by encouraging us to take responsible care of our lives where we have some control and then to hand the rest over to God’s care. We are invited to pray: “God, give me the serenity to accept what I cannot change, the courage to change what I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” (THE GRATEFUL HEART, Wilkie Au & Noreen Cannon Au, p. 124-126)

We cannot change the fact that we are living in a time of pandemic, but we CAN change our attitude toward it – and remain grateful that we are alive, we are here, and we know love and are loved – in the midst of it all.

I conclude with this story about Rabbi Abraham Heschel from his former student, longtime friend, colleague, and fellow rabbi, Samuel Dresner: “Several years before Heschel’s death in 1972, he suffered a near fatal heart attack from which he never fully recovered. I traveled to his apartment in New York to see him. He had gotten out of bed for the first time to greet me, and was sitting in the living room when I arrived, looking weak and pale. He spoke slowly and with some effort, almost in a whisper. I strained to hear his words. “Sam,” he said, “When I regained consciousness, my first feelings were not of despair or anger. I felt only gratitude to God for my life, for every moment I have lived. I was ready to depart. ‘Take me, O Lord,’ I thought, ‘I have seen so many miracles in my lifetime.’”

Exhausted by the effort, he paused for a moment, then added: “That is what I meant when I wrote (in the preface to my book of Yiddish poems): ‘I did not ask for success; I asked for wonder. And you gave it to me.’” (quoted by Robert J. Wicks, CROSSING THE DESERT, p. 44)

Rich words for any time of challenge: “Don’t worry about anything; pray about everything, thank God for all He has done.” Amen.