

## Cultivating Stillness

On Sunday, we continued our sermon series based on Brené Brown's book *The Gifts of Imperfection* by focusing on Guidepost 8: Cultivating Calm and Stillness . . . by letting go of Anxiety as a Lifestyle.

1. Warm-up Question: Where is the quietest place you've ever been?
2. Life is constantly trying to provoke us to freak out – to respond with overflowing anger, frustration, panic, anxiety, or some combination thereof. King Saul is a classic example. As Israel's first king, he struggled to keep rival tribes united while fighting off powerful external enemies. To make matters worse, the prophet who anointed him turned on him, and a young warrior named David gained enough fame to threaten to displace Saul's son as heir. Everything bubbled over at dinner one night when Saul and his son got into an argument, Saul threw his spear, and almost killed his son.
  - a. Bad things happen when stress gets the best of us. Tell us about a really stressful experience you've had lately. What happened? How did you respond?
  - b. When you're all wrought up inside with anxiety, anger, or despair, how does it feel? What analogy would you use to describe what it feels like?
3. There was a time in Brené Brown's life when anxiety became crippling. She was trying to juggle being a mother, wife, university professor, and successful author and speaker. "Whenever I got really anxious and stressed out," she says, "I would actually get lightheaded, and the room would start to spin. A couple of times, I literally fell over. The dizziness was new; the anxiety was not. . . . In many ways, anxiety was a constant in my life." Meanwhile, in her research, she noticed that wholehearted people processed stress very differently. "They were committed to a way of living where anxiety was a reality, but not a lifestyle. They did this by cultivating calm and stillness." First, let's look at calmness which, as Brené defines it, pertains to how we react in the heat of the moment in provocative situations.
  - a. Managing provocative situations, Brené says, begins with realizing you don't get to choose what happens to you, but you do get to choose how you respond. Brené says, "I [finally] learned . . . the value of bringing . . . quiet to difficult situations. I try to be slow to respond and quick to think." The Bible says much the same thing, "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger." James 1:19. Do you agree that this is the optimal way to respond to provocative situations? Why or why not?
  - b. Jesus faced all kinds of false accusations at his trial. "When Jesus was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, 'Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?' But Jesus gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed." Matthew 27:12. Why do you think Jesus responded this way? What might we learn from his example?

- c. Brené emphasizes that calmness in provocative situations is a learned response that requires practice. Drawing from what she writes, Jeff suggested a four-step approach: (a) when provoked (to panic, anger, or despair), count to ten before responding; (b) while counting, take a deep breathe; (c) say to yourself, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” then (d) in that moment or later, have a calm, honest conversation. What do you think of this approach? What would you add or subtract? Can you see yourself doing this?
- 4. Brené emphasizes that it’s not enough to have a good plan to apply in the heat of the moment; we also need to prepare in advance. In Brené’s terminology, “calm” is how I ideally respond in the heat of the moment. “Stillness” is how I prepare beforehand. Brené says, “I wish I could tell you how much I resisted even hearing people describe stillness as an integral part of their wholehearted journey. From meditation and prayer to regular periods of quiet reflection and alone time, they spoke about the necessity of quieting their bodies and minds as a way to feel less anxious and overwhelmed.” As the Bible says, “Be still and know that I am God.” Psalm 46:10.
  - a. Brené emphasizes that stillness can take many forms, not just Eastern meditation. It’s important to find a way of being still that fits your personality. Examples include: music, prayer, being in worship service, rocking on the porch, jogging, driving without the radio, walking outdoors, turning everything off in your house for a brief time, etc. What is the best way for you to practice quietude?
  - b. How does quietude affect you? What are the benefits?
  - c. Brené implies that it’s impossible to be consistently calm in the moment if we’re not regularly practicing quietude beforehand. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- 5. Being still can bring us face-to-face with our inner-demons. In the quiet, uncomfortable questions often arise. Is my life meaningful? Am I happy? What am I running from? Avoidance kicks in, and we rush to distract ourselves with busyness.
  - a. Read Mark 5:1-13. In this story, Jesus first addresses the demon generically, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit.” Nothing happens. Then Jesus says, “What’s your name?” And the demon gives its name. With that, Jesus is able to cast it out. What do you think we’re supposed to learn from this?
  - b. Jeff said, “The first step in exorcising our demons is to dare to face them in the quiet, look them in the eye, and call them by name.” He suggested hypothetical names like: “My Fear of Dying” demon, or “My Fear of Being Unlovable” demon. What name would you give to the most fearsome demon you often encounter when you enter a quiet place?
  - c. Jeff said, “Each time I confront my demon in the quiet, it gets weaker and weaker until eventually, it loses power over me.” Do you buy that? Why or why not?
  - d. Do you have a regular rhythm of stillness in your life? What does it look like? If you don’t have one, what kind of rhythm would you like to establish?