

September 14, 2008

“God’s answers to life’s tough questions: Stress”

Today begins a fall sermon series that is attempting to share God’s answers to some of life’s tough questions. My answers will be helpful and thoughtful, but obviously not the final word on the subjects. The series owes much to the book by Pastor Rick Warren by the same title, yes...the same Rick Warren of Presidential forum fame.

Today’s questions deals with a topic that is always timely and appropriate...how to deal with stress. We live in stressful times, with the economy doing laps lower and lower or closer and closer to the drain as some might say. We are fighting two wars and facing radical extremists on many different fronts...from Islamic terrorists to eco-terrorism and just plain domestic nuts. The news is a litany of dangers and dreads. Add to that the frantic pace of our lives here in silicon valley...where everyone seems to move at warp speed all the time, but especially driving on the freeways... and if you have kids, driving them from practice to program, from school to after-school and even church activities. Their lives are as programmed and as frantic as our own...we train them early here!

Well, it is easy to make the case for stress. In fact, I believe that the valley is a case study in people’s ability to handle huge amounts of stress and keep going. We have turned stress management into an Olympic sport.

Stress. It is here. There are really two sides to the problem: how do we handle the stress we are under, and how do we lessen the amount of stress we experience on a regular basis. How do we simplify and de-stress our existence?

We can begin by looking to Jesus as an example. He had a lot of stress in his life too. He lived in a country that demanded a lot from its citizens. The religious observances of the Pharisees involved complicated rituals, actions and laws for every waking moment of a person's life, the burden of which were hugely stressful. Added to that, Palestine was occupied by a foreign military force, the Roman governor and his troops burdened the average person with heavy taxes and tributes that they had to pay, as well as learning to observe another whole set of laws and customs, any one of which could result in severe and painful punishment both personally and culturally. Jesus adds to this the pressure of being the Son of God, bringing salvation to this stubborn and sinful humanity and the demands of his seemingly dimwitted disciples. Jesus knew what stress was...but he lived his life above it and there are some keys in his life that we can apply to our own.

First, Jesus knew who he was. Jesus is not defined by other people's expectations of him or their demands upon him. The Jewish religious leaders of the day had specific and detailed expectations for the Messiah...and they tried and tried to force Jesus to become what they wanted him to be. But Jesus was clear about who he was. In John's Gospel there are more than 11 declarations, where Jesus proclaims "I am the bread of Life, I am the Resurrection and the Life, I am the good shepherd, I am the way, the truth and the Life"...and more. Jesus felt no need to prove himself, and did not allow others to define his values or his self image. He did not jump through hoops to win approval or to feel good about himself. His self image is not caught up in being successful...

It is important that we have a core sense of who we are..and what is important to us. As Christians, our value system is not the same as the world around us. We do not buy into the silicon valley's manta of more is better and being busy is the same as being fully alive. Our view of

ourselves resists the desire to seek approval from others...even important people. To feel secure and less stressful, know that you are loved...loved more than you can imagine and beyond or in spite of how much you do, how much you have, or how much you give.

This allows us to rise above the frenetic pace of the valley and rest assured in Jesus as our lord. Remember, Jesus said "come unto me, all ye who are weary and stressed...and I will give you rest."

Second, Jesus know what he is trying to prove...what his goal is. Jesus said again and again what his objectives in life were..to seek and to save the lost, to glorify his Father in heaven, to do the will of God. He is very clear what he wants to do, and he makes no attempt to appease or please the religious establishment of his day. In fact, his objectives and theirs were often in conflict, and that was ok with Jesus. Jesus did not have to please everyone and make everyone happy...an impossible task anyway! Nor did he try and please the political powers of the day, but neither did he antagonize them---render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's. this is more than a clever answer to a trick question, but a principle of setting things right.

Third, Jesus knew how to focus on what is important. And it is clear that what is important to him is different than that which is important to others...including his disciples. When Jesus met the woman at the Well, his disciples did not want him to waste his time talking to a woman like that...or to waste his time in a Samaritan village. Yet Jesus valued her and them and spent time there teaching and healing. His disciples did not want him to waste time with the children...but again Jesus said to these was the kingdom of heaven. Over and over again we see Jesus very clear on what and who is important to him and to his ministry.

This is essentially the ability to prioritize. This is vital to stress reduction. We have to be able to focus on what is important, rather than what is urgent. They are not the same thing. The urgent clamors for our

attention, often distracting us from that which is important. Further, we rarely have the time or energy to do both. That tension intensifies our feelings of stress.

Seek ye first the kingdom of God...and all these things will be added unto you. If our priorities are correct and we spend our time on the Kingdom first, then the rest will fall in line and follow after. The things that don't matter will sort of fall away, and we will find we have the time and energy we need to accomplish what is important and exciting. It is exciting and fulfilling to do that which God has called us to do...remember, God's will fits us, and is good and acceptable. Being able to see that which is important, allows us to value the rest of the things clamoring for our time correctly...and put things in their proper priority/perspective. There is always more than we can do, but if we do the important first, then the things we let slide really are not that important at all, and we find ourselves surprised that the world does not stop when we don't do them anyway.

When I feel stressed and overwhelmed, I remember the old adage on how to eat an elephant. How do you eat an elephant...obviously, one bite at a time...so start taking bites out of the problem, the overwhelming pile. But not randomly biting here and there...make a list of priorities, begin to do the things that have value. And when it says that, it might be playing with your child is the real important thing...doing that may seem like it adds stress because so many other things are "important". No, they may feel urgent, but they are not necessarily important. What has value? What is truly a priority for the life you want to lead...not the one you are leading.

Another way to think about it is what my old dad used to ask me...will anyone care in a 100 years? In 10 years? In one year? In one month? week? Day?

Find the things that matter, that are important in the Kingdom view of the world and just do it. Take a bit of the elephant, then another and soon it is down to size.

4th. You also might find the elephant too big to eat by yourself. One of the things we need to learn to do to manage our stress is to delegate and recruit. Jesus had 12 disciples, and he had another 100 or so people around him. When Jesus came to the Samaritan Well, he sent the disciples into town to find groceries. He stayed by the well and rested, and struck up a life changing conversation with the woman who came to draw water.

One of my favorite unsung heroes in the Bible is Jethro. Jethro is the patron saint of business consultants. Jethro was Moses' father in law. When Jethro came to visit the grandkids, he noticed that old Moses was being run ragged by all the demands of leadership. He was acting as a judge for the people and all their claims and concerns. After a day or two, Jethro takes Moses aside as only a father in law can and says that this is not good, your wearing yourself ragged and not doing anyone any good. So Jethro devised a plan (as good consultants do) whereby Moses appointed various folks as Judges among the people...some over groups of 10, some over 10 Judges, some over those folks and up the organizational chart to Moses himself, who would only have to serve as the Supreme appellate judge in cases where the ordinary judges and their supervisors and such could not come up with a solution. This seemed good to the weary Moses who implemented the business plan and lived happily ever after. Yea MBA. To relieve stress, we need to find partners to join us in the struggle and we need to delegate some items to others...who likely can do a better job of it than we can anyway. To delegate, you have to have trust in others and be willing to share power and any praise that might come. If you can't do that, go back to the first item...and figure out who you are, and who you really should be.

After we delegate, there are three more quick items from the life of Jesus that relate to how we can reduce stress:

First, make people the priority, not things. People care about us, help us, love us, laugh with us...things don't. Make time for those you love, for those you are called to serve, for those who need you personally...and you will find your life meaningful and rewarding the stress level will go down.

Second, Rest and recreate. The more you do, the more you need to rest and recreate. For those of you who still haven't got the new paradigm, you can be more productive rested than frazzled. The sharp axe cuts the most wood. A good wood cutter will stop occasionally and take the time to sharpen the axe...

Jesus took time away. There are several times when we are told that Jesus said to his disciples, let us go away for awhile. This often happened after some major event...like the sermon on the mount or the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus says to the disciples that they all need a break, a time to rest and recharge...so he leads them away from the crowds, from the demands and the needs of others...where they spend time together, laugh, rest, learn, grow...renew. So, if you are stressed...go take a walk in the municipal rose garden, or drive over to Capitola and get sand in your toes or drive out to the end of Tully road and park up there while and watch the sun set and the city lights come on...it doesn't even cost anything. Turn on the cd player and have some coffee while you're at it...

Third, and finally, there is prayer. Prayer is the best stress buster that I know. Jesus spends hours in prayer. There were many times that the crowd pressed in on him from all sides, to the point where there was not time to even eat...and the next day the disciples would get up and Jesus would be nowhere to be found, for he had gotten up early to go

away to a quiet place to pray. Prayer feeds our souls and strengthens our faith, giving us courage and hope for the fight ahead.

There is a key verse from the Bible that I read earlier...

“ do not be anxious (stressed) for anything,
But in EVERYTHING, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, let your requests be known to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

Don't be stressed about anything, but in everything talk to God...remembering to give thanks for your many blessings while asking for what you need...and God's peace, which is more than you can understand, will help you keep your thinking clear and our emotions in control. (your heart and mind)...all of this is in Christ our Lord, who loves us.

Jesus spent a lot of time in prayer...if he, the living Word, the Son of God, needed to spend time in prayer to get through life with all its stress'ers and demands...what about us?

Pray, really pray...go into a private place where you can be alone and uninterrupted and talk to God about what is stressing you out...you will be surprised at the results.