



**“The Anxiety of Our Age”**  
**Scripture – Isaiah 55:1-9**  
**Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, June 2, 2013**

The Enfield Tennis Academy, in the novel, *Infinite Jest*, is a boarding school where youth go through rigorous workouts to sharpen their skills. They spend each day perfecting their forehand, backhand, footwork – every element of their game to give them a shot at making the professional circuit. The pressure to make it big is so intense that accepting a tennis scholarship to college is considered an admission of failure.

LaMont Chu is one of the students who is obsessed with tennis fame. He imagines dashing photos of himself in tennis magazines. He fantasizes TV announcers analyzing his stroke. He envisions corporate sponsors paying him to wear their logos. He is so obsessed with becoming famous that he cannot eat and he cannot sleep. When his performance begins to suffer, he goes to the Academy’s guru, Lyle.

LaMont admits to Lyle his rabid ambition and confesses that he’s ashamed of his insatiable hunger for hype. He’s convinced that if he could just become famous, then his hunger will finally be satisfied.

Lyle, like a wise and compassionate pastor, calmly listens to LaMont’s confession. Lyle provides a nonjudgmental environment which encourages LaMont to keep pouring out his honest feelings.

Lyle assures him that the pros never satisfy their appetite. He says, “They are trapped, just as you are.”

LaMont replies, “Is this supposed to be good news? This is awful news.”

“LaMont, are you willing to listen to a remark about what is true? The truth will set you free. But not until it is finished with you. You have been snared by something false. You burn with hunger for food that does not exist.”

He replies, “But the burning does not go away.”

“What fire dies when you feed it?”

“Would I sound ungrateful if I said this does not make me feel much better?”

“LaMont, you suffer from a desire caused by one of the oldest lies in the world. Do not believe the photographs. Fame is not the exit from any cage.”

“So I’m stuck in the cage from either side. Fame or tortured envy of fame. There’s no way out.”

And Lyle says, “You might consider how escape from a cage must surely require, foremost, awareness of the fact of the cage.”<sup>1</sup>

Could you be trapped in a cage? It could be one of your own making or you may have been lured into a cage by tempting voices.

Some are caged by fame or notoriety, but even when accolades pour in, they are never enough to quell the restlessness deep inside. Many are caged by the desire for wealth, convinced that it is the answer to their problems. And the fact that wealth does satisfy some longings appears to be convincing evidence that more wealth will bring more satisfaction. Yet, no amount of wealth quiets the voice within that occasionally nags us, asking: Is this all there is?

Some are caged by fame, some by wealth, and some by power. Yet, even if you exit one of those cages, there is no guarantee that you will become happy and contented. You still may need to be liberated from the anxiety of our age.

Theologian Paul Tillich said there are three anxieties that haunt us. The anxiety of death, the anxiety of guilt and condemnation, and the anxiety of meaninglessness.<sup>2</sup> Tillich pointed out that these three forms of anxiety are not caused by an abnormal state of mind. Rather, they simply arise from human existence.

First, we will not live forever. Most living creatures seem to have no awareness of their impending death, but we humans know that life is limited. The knowledge that we will die can produce worry, fear and despair.

Likewise, we are moral creatures. We possess a sense of what is right and wrong. When we lie, steal, cheat, oppress or become violent, we feel guilty and condemned.

Third, we are cerebral creatures. We do not simply strive to satisfy our desires for food, shelter, sex and companionship. We ponder deep questions. We wonder if human existence is merely an evolutionary accident or if life has meaning.

All three of these anxieties are present, but one tends to dominate. From its early days, the Christian Church answered the anxiety of death with the promise of eternal life. It answered the question of guilt and condemnation by promising forgiveness. And, it answered the question of meaninglessness by prescribing how to live an abundant life.

For most of the 2,000-year history of the church, the Christian message was focused on all three of these anxieties, but the dominant message focused on guilt and condemnation. I wonder if this was truly the anxiety most prevalent among the majority. My cynical side says perhaps this was simply the easiest of the three for the church to assert its control over people. The message of the church was a constant drumbeat that humans are sinful, fallen creatures, and then dictated the terms of forgiveness. The foundation for evangelism conformed to this message. The aim was to convince people they were guilty of sin, but they could find forgiveness in the church. This approach worked for centuries.

However, with the erosion of institutional authority, things have changed. The dominant anxiety of our age is not guilt and fear of condemnation, but rather meaninglessness. Many wonder if there is a point to it all, and if their own life has a purpose. Blaise Pascal recognized this anxiety centuries ago, when he said, “All of humanity’s problems stem from (the individual’s) inability to sit quietly in a room alone.” Most people become anxious about the questions that emerge from deep within themselves.

To ignore the questions about purpose and meaning, many of us cling to diversions. We constantly pursue the distractions provided by entertainment or the pursuit of sport. We stare at the television or computer screen for hours. We focus on our golf handicap or winning a tennis tournament. We fill up our calendars, and our children's schedules, in order to keep busy; in order to accomplish; in order to feel like a success; but primarily, in order to divert our attention from the "anxiety that suspects there is no purpose in life."<sup>3</sup>

It's not simply people with a non-existent spiritual life who question the meaning of human existence. I suspect that if we are honest, all of us have our moments of doubt. In fact, I worry about people who claim to have no doubts. I wonder if they are trying to convince others of their strong faith, or if they have so successfully diverted their attention that they are unaware of the questions that lurk within, or if they have repressed the deep questions so as to hide them from themselves.

The prophet Isaiah has a question for us: "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?"

Why do we attempt to find satisfaction in material objects? Why do we spend so much time looking for things to make us happy, but spend little time pursuing the deeper things of life that will bring us joy? Why do we chase after so many fleeting gods, and spend so little time deepening our tie with the one true God?

There is nothing wrong with enjoying entertainment or sports or any number of activities. It's just that they are not enough. They won't satisfy the deepest itch. We are mental, physical and spiritual beings, and if we stunt our spiritual nature, we will never feel complete.

You can work on your golf swing and become the best player in your group. You can develop a fine reputation for your expertise in cooking Northern Italian cuisine. You can perfect playing a musical instrument and impress all of your friends. But if you ignore your spiritual nature, you are selling yourself short.

Isaiah says that to genuinely satisfy the hunger in our souls, we must seek the One who is the source of life. Presumably, that's why we're in worship on Sunday morning, when we could be doing a thousand other things. Good for us for at least figuring out the most important thing: Without God, life is not fulfilling. Sure, we can find temporary happiness here and there, but not the joy that makes life rich. We can find plenty of things to occupy our time, but not what we need to bring peace to our soul.

The story is told of "a well-known actor who was asked at a county gathering to recite the Twenty-Third Psalm. With dramatic flair, he mounted the stage and artfully articulated the vivid imagery of this familiar passage. The people were entertained and applauded his performance. Later, in the same program, an old woman was asked to make some kind of contribution to the evening. She apologized, explaining that she could think of nothing else to do but recite the Twenty-Third Psalm, the portion of scripture she knew best. Her voice cracked as she started 'The Lord is my Shepherd.' She stumbled over some of the words and the people had to strain to hear her voice. But by the time she finished, there were few dry eyes in the audience. The actor hopped onto the stage, hugged the woman, and expressed his conviction about what had made the difference. He said, 'I know the Psalm, but she knows the shepherd.'"<sup>4</sup>

A deeper connection with God, a realignment of our priorities with God's priorities, and a commitment to live in new ways will go very far in answering the question about a meaningful life.

## NOTES

1. Daniel B. Clendenin, "Hungering for Food That Doesn't Exist," *Journey With Jesus*, March 3, 2013.

2. Tillich actually spoke of 1) fate and death, 2) emptiness and meaninglessness, and 3) guilt and condemnation. However, he said they could be represented by death, meaninglessness and condemnation. See, *The Courage to Be*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 36<sup>th</sup> printing, 1971), p. 41.
3. Douglas John Hall, *Waiting for Gospel*, (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2012), p.32.
4. Susan R. Andrews, *The Tears of God*, (Lima Ohio: CSS Publishing, 2012), p.81.