

Rev. Ali Donohue
Episcopal Church at Yale
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Proper 23 Year B

The enemy of faith is not doubt, Anthony de Mello tells us. Doubt is faith's friend. The enemy of faith is fear.

In today's Gospel, we watch as a rich young man has an encounter where Jesus looks at him lovingly and invites him to follow him, and the man walks away grieving. Throughout the Gospels, when someone meets Jesus, the most common word in all the Gospels to describe the reaction is amazed. Not today.

We assume it's because the young man said no to Jesus, that his wealth — and all the comfort it provides - were more valuable to him than a life of discipleship. That he was a proverbial camel trying unsuccessfully to pass through the eye of a needle. That he encountered Jesus and said no.

But it's also possible that he was aggrieved because he was going to sell all of his possessions, and parting with them was exceptionally difficult. That he would be losing his favorite things, his comforts, and maybe he really believed he needed them. Maybe he was doing something courageous, but he found it hard. We don't really know.

What we do know is this: the young man was at a decisive moment in his life, he was facing the future, he was making a

major decision — both yes and no are decisions — and he was grieving. He was upset. He was struggling.

And this is a situation to which we can all relate. We've all been there. We've stood before the future — whether that's returning to in-person classes, meeting up with someone new, taking a new job, or even making plans to see old friends for the first time in a long time — and we've felt nervous, anxious. Fearful.

Often, we don't turn to Jesus in these moments. We turn to shopping or chocolate or escape fantasies or Netflix. We turn to things that cost money, which is one of the reasons why wealth gets such a bad rap here — because it gives us an easy, but temporary fix for how we feel.

And if researchers are correct, due to pandemic lockdown, we have been anxious far more in the past few months, the past year, than we've ever been.

The New York Times recently published an article entitled, “How Young People’s Social Anxiety Has Worsened in the Pandemic,” and it goes on to tell us how much harder it has been for many young people to emerge from the isolation and lockdown of the last year and a half. Young people with anxiety disorders feel like they've taken several steps back. Young people without anxiety prior to the pandemic suddenly are coming up against it at times they simply don't see coming. And many report wanting to go back to isolation, back to being alone.

One young woman interviewed for the article talks about moving cities to pursue a master's degree. She initially felt excited about exploring a new city. She had always enjoyed eating out with friends and discovering new cafes in the past. But when she and her friends were out, she was feeling really nervous and anxious...

"I was alone throughout the pandemic, and I think that feeling of loneliness followed me, despite being able to go out again," she said.

Another young man found that socializing after lockdown was suddenly difficult, and that anxiety took over whenever he needed to leave his house. His latest triumph was accepting an invitation to meet his friends for Mexican food, and he sat in his car in the parking lot, giving himself a pep talk. "OK," he recalled telling himself. "You know these people. You can do this." He repeated the refrain as he stepped out. "You can do this, you can do this."

College counseling centers report an increase in students in crisis and have started training faculty on the signs and symptoms, which can easily be misread by adults as disengagement or distraction. Students miss class or meetings. They show up late. Leave early.

"If faculty are not aware of social anxiety and its impact, they may assume that students don't care or that they are disinterested," said one counselor "Really, it has much more to do with the fear of being called on or being wrong or looking stupid."

College counseling centers are reporting increases in disordered eating patterns and in sexual assault cases. Ways of socializing — the very behaviors we've been practicing all our lives — are off. Experts often refer to our social skills as muscles and they are suffering from being out of use for so long. Injured athletes know they can't heal from an injury and expect to have the same level of conditioning they did before — that it's an uphill climb. But somehow we do — we think that we should be able to pick up where we left off. And we can't.

In my conversations with students this year — I see a longing for home, a disappointment sometimes with what's here for them, a wondering if it exists somewhere else. And of course I can't answer those questions — only they can — but it makes a lot of sense that in the midst of an acutely uncertain world, people want to feel secure.

The good news is that Jesus looks at us lovingly too and then does something we too might not expect: *he invites us down a path of uncertainty*, he asks us to eschew our comforts, to depart from places we feel at home, to cast off the comforts we've amassed around ourselves. Karl Marx famously called religion “the opium of the masses,” as if it soothes and calms and anesthetizes us. And sometimes I think: I wish! Have you ever met Jesus? Jesus does not let us take refuge in our denials or our addictions or any of the things we try to assuage our anxiety with. That reality is where he most resides; it is where we do not venture alone, it is where he goes first and we follow.

Absolutely we need to take care of ourselves. Absolutely we need to look out for each other. If we have been one of the lucky ones to escape the increased anxiety, then it falls to us to bear Christ to our friends, to invite them along, to accompany them places we know will be hard. And sometimes we just need to stay home. But also know this: Jesus goes before you to those anxious places. Whether that's asking for help, talking about it, a job interview, or simply a meal with friends. From those places that seem frightening, Jesus turns, looks lovingly at you, and says, "Come. Follow me."

In Jesus we always have an ally, we always have an advocate, we always have a God who walks ahead of us into life's dark places and meets us there. We always have someone who lovingly reaches out to us, seeing us for all we are, and calling us to a life not of fear, but of faith and of friendship.

Amen.