

## Fear Not!

Early in my pastorate at Good Shepherd Baptist Church, I was asked to serve as an official mentor for students at two quite different training programs for Christian ministers: Fuller Seminary Northwest and the School of Theology and Ministry at Seattle University. Students in both programs invariably asked me what I thought was the most important thing they could tell the congregations they would eventually lead and upon which they and their congregations could then base their message to the world. And I always told them the same thing: Remind them that God loves them.

That came as a surprise to some. After all, when Jesus was posed a very similar question, “Which is the most important commandment?” he reminded people to love God and to love their neighbor. So, why did I switch that message around from “Love God” to “God loves you?” I guess part of my rationale comes from the old Gospel hymn we just sang, “Oh, How I Love Jesus.” The chorus is very simple: “Oh, how I love Jesus! Oh, how I love Jesus! Oh, how I love Jesus, because he first loved me.” I think there’s a lot of wisdom in that song, written by Frederick Whitfield back in 1855 and still sung in many churches. I think modern people respond best not to commandments, but to love. When we know that we are loved, we find it much easier to love in return. And when we know that we are loved by the One who created and sustains all life, well, that’s a pretty powerful motivator for us to love and to be able to face all sorts of problems.

We do need help to face all sorts of problems today, don’t we? Foremost in all of our minds today is the pandemic, of course. How do we cope? How do we protect ourselves and our loved ones? To vaccinate or not to vaccinate? To mask or not to mask? Y’all know where I stand on those questions. And once we get past the pandemic, there’s still climate change, storms and earthquakes, violence, homelessness, racism, homophobia, economic upheaval, and a whole host of issues that keep us up at night.

The thing that keeps us up at night when we think of those things is fear. Fear that we are powerless in the face of those huge issues. Fear that we and those we love will be crushed by their weight. Our fears are then preyed on by those who would have us fall under their control. You know who I’m talking about. Unscrupulous politicians, who will do or say anything to get our vote. Grasping businesspeople and their allies, the advertising industry, who will do or say anything to get our dollar. Even certain preachers who will do or say anything to convince us that they are the true arbiters of righteousness. These human predators want us to be afraid, so they can control us.

My friend, Rev. Dr. Eric Law, talks about fear, both positive and negative, in his most recent book: Fear Not: Living Grace and Truth in a Frightened World. He makes the point that fear, properly understood, is a good thing. It keeps us from putting ourselves in unsafe situations. Like Eric Law, I have a fear of heights and falling. I’m very cautious about standing too close to the edge of a drop-off. When I was a high school and college student, I did a lot of lighting work in the theatre. I used to think very little about charging up a ladder or shinnying across a catwalk above the stage. But as I got older, my fear increased. Now, driving on a narrow road above a gorge or mountain pass is enough to give me white knuckles. Sometimes, my fear inappropriately limits what I can do. That’s what Eric Law cites as the negative side of fear. He points out that if we go through life avoiding the things that we fear, we cannot grow. We will

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miss all sorts of positive opportunities because of our fear. Instead, he writes, we must face our fears. “We must learn to face our fear by following it, probing it, tracing it, and linking it to the most terrible destinations—usually meaning those involving pain, suffering, chaos, isolation, and death. Only then can we see the wider vision of what this fear is calling us to do.”

We fear things like heights or spiders or other common phobias because we dwell on the negative things that can happen. We feel we are not in control. And those things, plus the big problems I mentioned earlier can keep us up at night because we don't have a lot of confidence in our own abilities to cope. With the big problems, that's understandable. None of us, after all, can single-handedly solve climate change, violence, homelessness, or any of the others. But each of us is capable, as unique children of God, to contribute to solutions. And, what's more, we can have faith that, if we and everyone else contributes in the best way that we can, then the Creator and Sustainer of all things will utilize our contributions to move those ills to health. We know that because of promises in the Bible about God's love. And God's love, which is perfect, can cast out all our fear. In the rest of our time together, I want to focus on my two favorite passages about God's love, passages I used in my homily at my dad's memorial last month, both of which are very directly about addressing our largest fears.

First, the words of Jesus from the Gospel According to John, chapter 14, verses 1-3 and verse 27: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” These words come in the midst of the long conversation John records Jesus having with his disciples at the Last Supper, the Passover meal they shared on the night Jesus was betrayed. Jesus is allaying the fears of his disciples that he will go away, in fact that he will die, and leave them alone. Death, our own or that of a loved one, is one of our greatest fears.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled.” I have always loved that word from Jesus, and I also loved it in a work of more fanciful writing about the great truths in the universe, J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings. Tolkien, as we've discussed before, was a devout Catholic believer and his work is full of references to the Bible in general and the Gospel in particular. Professor Tolkien appropriated those words of Jesus for the great Elf-Queen Galadriel who delivers them to the weary and grief-stricken members of the Fellowship of the Ring after the fall of Gandalf, their wizard companion. As I've said before, I cannot read or hear those words without hearing in my mind the beautifully comforting delivery of Cate Blanchett in Peter Jackson's film version of “The Lord of the Rings.” In Tolkien's work, the members of the Fellowship face death and betrayal and unimaginable hardship, just as Jesus' disciples did. The quest of the Fellowship is successful, and the forces of evil are turned back but victory is incomplete. Traces of evil remain in their world and some things that are good dwindle and fade away. So it shall ever be in this mortal world but do not let your hearts be troubled. Our God has the final say and our God is love.

Jesus' words in the next verse have also become a familiar phrase to Christians. “In my Father's house are many dwelling places (or mansions).” We hear it most often at funerals. For us, it is

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part of the consolation offered at the death of a loved one; a reminder that we have the hope of eternal life after death, that we will be admitted to the presence of God and reunited with those who have gone before us. The promise is clear for us. If it were not so, Jesus would have told us. He has gone ahead to prepare a place for us, just as the disciples went ahead the afternoon he first spoke these words, to prepare the place for dinner. Jesus promises that we will be with him, that he will receive us, that where he is, we will be also. First, Jesus calms the fears of his followers, then reminds them, and us, of why he has the power to do so. He is going ahead of us to welcome us into his Father's house.

The image of the Father's house is a rich one in Western literature and music. I love all sorts of music and two of my favorite musicians have used Jesus' words here as a jumping off place for their own reflections on their Christian faith or heritage and on life. I know you all have heard me cite these artists before but it's worth remembering that there are Christians and seekers out there in the mainstream culture who are wrestling with the same questions and examining the same scriptural answers that we are dealing with in the Church. Bono, the lead singer and lyricist of the group U2, mingles Jesus' promise with Jesus' story of the prodigal son in his song, "The First Time". "My father is a rich man / He wears a rich man's cloak / Gave me the keys to his kingdom coming / Gave me a cup of gold / He said I have many mansions / And there are many rooms to see / But I left by the back door / And I threw away the key..." Many of Bono's songs show him grappling with the intersection of his faith and the rock & roll lifestyle that he both embraces and is repulsed by. In this, he reminds me of St. Paul, who wrote to the Romans, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." I've been there; I know many of you have, too. But there is no need to fear, even if we wander. Our Loving Creator does not abandon us. In our encounter with Jesus, we can say, as Bono sang, "for the first time, I feel loved."

Bruce Springsteen uses the image of the Father's house to express his experience of the fallenness of modern man. In his song, "My Father's House," his protagonist tells of a dream in which he is a child lost in the woods. Running down the forest path, "With the devil snappin' at my heels," he sees his father's house ahead, "shining hard and bright." Springsteen sings "I ran till I fell, shaking in his arms." As the song continues, the man awakes and decides that the time has come to make amends with the father from whom he has been estranged for many years: "I awoke and I imagined the hard things that pulled us apart / Will never again, sir, tear us from each other's hearts / I got dressed, and to that house I did ride / From out on the road, I could see its windows shining in light / I walked up the steps and stood on the porch / A woman I didn't recognize came and spoke to me through a chained door / I told her my story, and who I'd come for / She said 'I'm sorry, son, but no one by that name lives here anymore...'"

For Springsteen's protagonist, the promise has been broken. The house continues to call to him, but he must live cut off from it, "cross this dark highway where our sins lie unatoned..." But, the apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians that through faith, believers have become the adopted children of God, the heirs of God. Unlike the lost son in Bruce Springsteen's song, we have already been welcomed into our Father's house by our loving Father. Our sins are atoned. We need not fear on that score.

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Jesus, remember, also promises us peace. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” The world’s empires promise peace through the destruction of our enemies. They mean peace as the cessation of open warfare. The price for such peace has occasionally been described as eternal vigilance but what that really means is eternal suspicion, eternal enmity, an eternal willingness to scapegoat. What Jesus offers is true peace, the shalom of God. As we know, shalom goes far beyond cessation of war to include wellness and wholeness for all people, confidence rather than suspicion, hospitality rather than enmity. Jesus lived beyond fear and so we, too, can live beyond fear.

There is another passage I love that helps me not to dwell in fear. In the latter part of Romans, chapter 8, Paul writes this: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose... What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

How can we question that we are beloved by God, Paul writes, when God became flesh, suffered, and died, so that we might be redeemed? God has declared us innocent, wiped our slate clear of any and all sins. Jesus died for us to express the greatest love the world has ever known. The Gospel according to John records that Jesus said it himself, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” Paul is willing to affirm that in the case of the love of Christ for humanity, love conquers all. “What shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword?” These are rhetorical questions and for Paul it is clear that the answer is “No, nothing!” Paul faced all of those dangers in his life, as we can read in the Acts and in his letters, and came out with his faith intact.

Paul then goes on to list the forces that people feared, the potential enemies that could rip the believer from the sheltering arms of God. Some we would list today, some we might not. Some would be listed by people in some cultures and not in others. Everyone, of course, faces the vicissitudes of life and the inevitability of death. Everyone knows the troubles of today and fears the problems lurking around the corner tomorrow. For some of us, mornings are tough times of the day because we build up in our minds the obstacles and challenges that will face us during the day. We prepare ourselves for the worst, but do not dare to hope for the best. And yet, we know for the believer that hope is one of God’s great loving gifts for us. The future is not to be feared; Jesus taught “Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.” As Connie often says to me: “It’ll all be OK in the end. If it isn’t OK, it isn’t the end.”

My sisters and my brothers, death seems very present to us in the news of the day, in the bulletins from Haiti and in our pandemic reality. The dreadful toll of COVID-19 continues to mount worldwide. We grieve for friends or family members, for notable persons in our culture,

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for the thousands that we do not know but who were precious to someone who now grieves. The good news is that resurrection awaits us all. I know that my redeemer liveth, that our Loving Creator stands with us and that we can never be separated from the love of God through Christ Jesus. So, I say for us all this morning, “Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid... Nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.” Do not be afraid; we are loved. Thanks be to God. Amen.