

“WHERE IS FEAR RIGHT FOR THE FAITHFUL?”

Fear of the Other: No Fear in Love: Sermon Series #3

A sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Minister

“Amazing Grace” is likely our most beloved hymn. As we close worship with this chestnut, notice how we sing the paradoxical, but pleasing phrase, “Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved.” But isn’t grace for us the unmerited love of God in Christ Jesus, and the power of God working in us to give us lives we couldn’t have had otherwise on our own? So how can composer John Newton say that grace both teaches us to fear, and also relieves our fears?

Clearly, he describes a different order of fear here than the reflexive fear of strangers that is our second nature. He distinguishes two different kinds of fear. New-ton even imagines the church as God’s place to school us in managing our fears.

Let’s review the landscape of fear. So far in this series we’ve described how our natural biological fears, issuing out millennia of survival, can spiritually taint us. Today I want to say along with John Newton there is wrong fear and also right fear. Wrong fear is a fanciful flight of our suspicious imagination more than the reality of any true threat. Wrong fear is fear that is out of proportion to any threat that actually looms. Wrong fear is fear that plays on our insecurities and builds up false barriers between us. Wrong fear cheats us out of what God wants for us. At its best, the church can teach us to be afraid of our wrongful propensities to fear.

In preaching this sermon series on fear, I have spoken of how fight-or-flight fear nestled at the base of our brain doesn’t always bring out our best as moderns; how equipped to fear in our long survival of the fittest can predispose us to hate; how God’s perfect love has power to cast out all fear. But this is not to say that fear is always inappropriate. Aristotle defined insanity as foolishly having no fear.

Sometimes fear can validate love. For example, I fear for my granddaughter Freya’s well-being because I don’t want this world’s real dangers to exploit her vulnerability. I fear for everyone with high-blood pressure because I watched it take my younger brother. So there are valid fears and invalid, inflammatory fears.

“Fear not” is an expression found in well over three hundred places in Scripture. The phrase is heard particularly often around Easter where those who first meet the risen Christ experience fear rather than joy. What were they so afraid of, do you think? Not just some ghost back from the dead, but that the one who commanded us to love neighbors, even enemies, and welcome strangers, was back. To imagine that we must take Jesus’ commands seriously is a scary proposition.

On just one occasion, that of the gospel lesson I read moments ago, Jesus urged fear upon his disciples. “Do not fear those who kill the body but can’t kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell.” (Matthew 10.28) Did you ever notice how when we do joys and concerns here on Sunday mornings, our foremost concerns tend to be bodily ailments much more often than threats to our souls? So what was Jesus talking about with this one and only injunction to fear? He meant it’s better to fear displeasing God than the criticism of others.

We tell our children, “Don’t talk to strangers.” Jesus demands that we welcome the stranger. Many of us come to the sanctuary of the church for comfort, safety, and peace. Jesus demands we renounce security, saying, “Follow me,” bidding us to find and take our crosses. Our problem, with regard to fear, is that we fear the stranger more than we fear the God who commands us all to love each other.

The church is where we learn to fear the God commanding us to love and embrace strangers. When my listeners hear that, they often tell me to get real. That this is a sham never-never land that would make us into weak patsies. But we all must decide which reality we finally attend to. In the Christian view of reality, we aren’t only created with deep-seated fears of the stranger, rooted in the biology of our survival across eons. We’re also created with a will and need to embrace. And as we move toward the stranger, despite other instincts we feel, we also move toward the life God has intended us to live. We’re destined for communion.

Yes, the same communion celebrated by this meal, gathered at this table, to become a different kind of community than found anywhere else on earth. It makes me sad when the church can talk about nothing more ambitious than “respectful dialogue.” Yes, of course, any honest give-and take-encounter is good. And any genuine movement toward reconciliation is better still. But God still stubbornly expects nothing less from us than full embrace. Think of the father embracing his prodigal son after his errant wanderings. That was the part of our Racial Recon-ciliation Sunday last autumn that gladdened my heart the most. Paul Smith and his companions felt our embrace and that signaled the transforming Gospel here.

William Willimon, who wrote the book this sermon series is based upon, tells of a woman in his church who was victimized in a horrible way. She was assaulted in her own backyard at 10 am. His church their level best they could to support her, to help her find a skilled therapist, specializing in helping victims of such crimes. A month later, she appeared at his pastor’s study, needing to talk. “How is therapy going?” he asked. “Fine,” she said, “as far as it goes.” “As far as it goes?”

“I’m dealing with my hurt and anger but, because I’m a Christian, I know Jesus expects more...I am distressed that I am gripped by irrational fear anytime I meet on the sidewalk a man of the same race as the one who assaulted me. I feel fear and hate,” she said. Willimon affirmed such feelings are perfectly natural. But

she wanted much more than perfectly natural. She wanted to transcend her hurt.

“Do you truly believe God is great enough to free me from my fear?” she blurted out. “Can God help me not give this victory to the criminal who wanted to ruin my life? Can the Lord help me take charge and turn this thing around?” she pleaded. These were questions asked by a woman schooled all of her life in fearing God. Questions of someone whose fear of God motivated her to subdue natural fears.

Hearing a story like hers, we recognize the inadequacy of our sentimental “all we need is love” prancing and posturing around tolerance, diversity, and inclusion. Nothing wrong with these minor virtues, but we need stronger, higher virtues like forgiveness, mercy and grace which only come alive by steady disciplining. Jesus is more than an advocate for tolerance and inclusiveness where the greatest sin is lack of diversity. Hate and evil are real and we need stronger nonviolent weapons against them. Jesus preached God’s radical inclusion of sinners. And Jesus meant not only that he should talk about it, but that we should live and breathe it.

It takes spiritual discipline to overcome something as daunting as her deep hurt. The kind of discipline we only gain in a community committed to following Jesus. The kind of discipline where we strive to see the stranger as loved and cherished by God in the stranger’s mix of decency and sin, good and evil, as we exist now. As we together we recall Christ’s wide-stretched arms embracing all, it becomes possible. If we can’t see or understand it, at this table we can touch and taste it.

I celebrate that we can repair to this table, when words fail me, or sacred mystery confounds you, or when we can’t see any way forward. Bread and cup take us to a deeper place, the very heart of God, when our faith feels so very small. Together our faith becomes great as what we share here goes deeper than words.
Amen.