

**“PERCEIVED ENEMIES, REAL AND IMAGINED”**

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As a boy, I would lay awake at night, brooding over my fears. I would work myself up, as children do, then stare at the ominous pattern in the grain of my bedroom door. Out of the swirl of that grain, I came to see a face, scowling and menacing, then drift off into fitful sleep...Doing my morning routine, seeing that same door in the clear light of day, I wondered, why was I so afraid? It was just a stupid door. I didn't realize that door was a screen against which I was projecting my inner life.

It's a nothing story but worth telling because to a large extent it's our human story. And no matter how much we try to talk ourselves out of our anxious nature, it rules our world to an alarming degree. So my sermon today wants to get at that.

A favorite Chinese fortune cookie says, "Worry is interest paid in advance on a debt you may not even owe." To transcend fear and live from another place than anxiety, we must first grasp how deeply innate, natural and universal it is to fear the stranger. Our entrenched tendency to stick to our tribe and distrust others--dating back to the 200,000 years of living as hunters and gatherers, long before we became agricultural for the last 10,000 years--remains very alive within us.

Having said that, we're better positioned to appreciate how radical Leviticus was as God explicitly commanded Israel to "love the immigrant as yourself." Let's just call it another hammer blow shattering our facile caricature of the "NT as the God of grace, and the OT as the God of judgment", a prejudice I want us to abandon. Our reading from Leviticus not only says do not oppress those alien to ourselves, but you should love those people. We should because we have all been aliens at one time or another. We should because God is the God of all these peoples.

Of course, neither the people of Israel nor ourselves as Christians have always lived up to that ideal in our history of conquering Canaan or burning witches. But let's not lose track of the ideal clearly set forth before us amid our human failures.

The Greek NT word for stranger is *xenoi*, as in xenophobia, fear of the stranger. Xenophobia isn't only historical and Biblical. It lives in America's politics today. In my first sermon of this series last March, I claimed xenophobia is even biological.

Neuroscientists tell how our brains constantly judge whether events and persons whom we encounter will hurt or help us based on whether they minimize danger or maximize reward. As we meet strangers, the primitive amygdala—or lizard brain--powerfully decides, as it has for millions of years, whether another is a possible reward or a potential threat. That calculation in turn induces desire to move toward that one or move away. Because of these complex calculations, our

interaction with strangers makes our brains work much harder than being with friends, where our brain expends less energy and shifts down into comfort zones. Let' plug this into real life. A pastor friend of mine heard a paid spokesperson for the NRA say that he opposed any change in America's gun laws because widespread gun ownership is the only thing protecting us from Islamic terrorists who hate and want to kill us. Never mind we lavishly pay for a military to protect us. Can any of us here cite even one story of, say, a plumber or a secretary whose personal handgun protect him or her from an Isis terrorist? Anyone? Precisely.

This is the amygdala's limbic system gone wild. This is how fear gets leveraged.

Evolution hard-wired our brains to be cautiously self-protective. That made sense as predators once lurked daily in rustling bushes, threatening us. Fear moved us into high alert. Today our once-valuable coping mechanisms lead to sloppy thinking, damaging mistakes in judgment and vicious false assertions about strangers. Distrust anyone who says, "All Syrians are..." because the refugees are fleeing from the same Isis who in countless ways is being leveraged to excite our fears.

What are the top killers in America today? The answer is heart disease, cancer, and strokes. Yet we reliably rate terrorists, pedophiles, plane crashes, mad cow disease, and bird flu as our top fears. Crime rates have dropped by 2/3rds since the 90s but our fears get leveraged so we feel like crime rates are rising. You can buy a handgun for self-defense against bad people, if you like. But in truth they overwhelmingly result in gun accidents, fiery domestic disputes, and suicides. Of course, gun sales and a gun culture are both very lucrative. Wayne LaPierre, the head of the NRA, and the most frightened man in America, earns over \$1 million.

So what are we to do? Do you recall Macauley Caulkin's fear of the furnace in *Home Alone*? He overcame that by realizing the furnace posed him no real threat. Unlike me with my door or Macauley with his furnace, it usually requires a parent taking us by the hand, patiently and respectfully explaining our fear is unfounded. Mindfulness is our word today as adults find their way not to be governed by fear.

Maybe more than mindfulness is needed. Maybe we need a faith bigger than ourselves to get a hold of us and expect more than what our lizard brain calls right. Christianity has long been at this, rejecting and overcoming all kinds of so-called natural inclinations, like sleeping with everyone who comes along, responding to slights with battering rams, envying and stealing from others, lying with abandon.

Christianity says we are not abandoned to our biological history. We are better than our genes. God will give us a worthier life than if we had never known Christ. We're not only born with chronic selfishness but we're also born in God's image.

We can transcend survival of the fittest, nature red in tooth and claw, because we are also hard-wired for connection. Scientist Jonathon Haidt writes of the brain's release of oxytocin as strangers become friends or find a comfort zone together. Oxytocin is called the "neurochemistry of safe connectivity." We feel at ease, safe and content. Blood pressure ebbs and clear thinking rises as our sense of well-being increase. Like Confirmation Sunday last Sunday, an oxytocin fest. I hope the same for our Annual Meeting. That is what occurs in trusted environments as friends and family can come together. Haidt's studies of human happiness show that the single most important factor is positive feelings about social connections. Oxytocin is science's way of saying, "perfect love casts out all fear." (I John 4.19)

A parable in the Hindu Vedas describes a man entering a darkened room. To his horror, he sees what appears like a cobra coiled in the corner. Though still full of terror at the prospect of that venomous snake ready to strike, he fights the urge to flee, and instead moves toward the snake to examine and confront it. Upon closer inspection the specter of that snake is nothing but a harmless coil of rope. This, according to the Vedas, is the purpose of wisdom—to disarm life fearsomeness by demythologizing the dreaded threat of the unknown. The truth of the world and the truth God gives us in Christ make life less fearful, much fuller.

But only if we have guts enough for the inevitable transformation that comes as we follow Jesus. He is unimpressed as we manage to love our neighbor, as hard as that is. Jesus raises the bar to loving our enemies, the foreign other, the scary stranger. As he does so, he only advances the same revolution Leviticus started. Amen.