

What to Fear and What to Love

Rev. David Reynolds

Matthew 10: 24-39

He needed to learn how to fear. He was the younger of two sons and had little knowledge or skill at much of anything, but he had the odd trait of being unafraid of anything. So, when his father suggested that he learn something useful, he replied that he wished to learn “how to shudder.” So begins this peculiar tale told by the Brothers Grimm, about a boy's journey to learn how to fear. Scott Bader-Saye has pointed out that what's most interesting about this story is the connection made between fear and love. See, not only is the boy without fear, but he's also without love or compassion. He's unable to relate to others in a truly human way. He throws an innocent man down the stairs of a church tower, where he leaves him crumpled in a corner as he goes home to go to bed. He beats an old man with an iron bar and is completely without emotion about it. Well, the boy finally learns to shudder when his wife throws a bucket of cold water on him while he's sleeping. He wakes up shouting, “Oh, what is making me shudder? ... Yes, now I know how to shudder.”

At the end, it's not really clear that the boy has learned how to fear so much as he's learned to be startled, but what's fascinating about the story is this correlation between the lack of fear and the lack of love. You begin to see that it's causal relationship-- the boy lacks fear *because* he *loves* nothing, since those who love nothing fear no loss. So, it would also seem in the gospel text for today that Jesus would teach his disciples how to fear the right things because they love the right things, and to therefore give them the ability to let other fears go. There's no doubt in this text that they were scared. And with good reason, as Jesus was never one to pull a punch. Here he is preparing the disciples for their mission and he's already told them he's sending them out as sheep among the wolves. And he's warned them that when people realize that this is the living God of love they are presenting and not just some idol that reinforces all of their previous “us and them” thinking, that some, perhaps many will turn on them.

And so he says, look, a disciple shouldn't expect any better treatment than the teacher, so if they've called the teacher “Dungface,” the house of Beelzebul, don't expect anything different! “So,” says Jesus, “have no fear of them.” Does that make any sense? “I'm sending you as sheep among wolves.” They hate and mistreat me, so don't expect anything different for yourselves. So, don't be afraid. What? He's just given them reasons to be afraid. Of course, they're afraid. And it's safe to assume that the things they were afraid of are the things Jesus deals with here. Their own personal safety for one. They have reason to fear the loss of their life. Secondly, they are afraid of the loss of family. For Jesus said to them, “Don't think I've come to make life cozy. I've come to cut – make a sharp knife-cut between son and father, daughter and mother, bride and mother-in-law...” “If you prefer father or mother over me, you don't deserve me. If you prefer son or daughter over me, you don't deserve me.” What loves to lose! They didn't want to lose their sons and their daughters, their mothers and their fathers...their life. Of course the disciples were scared.

I stayed with my parents while I was down at Annual Conference in Roanoke this past week. And the fact is, they are failing some. They're finding it harder and harder to remember things, and some of their short-term memory is just gone. And so, it's like they're pedaling as fast as they can just to keep their heads above water. And they're experiencing some nagging physical problems as well. And so, when I left down there as I was hugging my mother goodbye, the thought, the fear washed over me maybe for the first time in my life, that it could be the last time I ever saw her.

Our fears are definitely tied to our loves, aren't they? We see that in what we teach our kids about not talking to strangers. We see that in an ethic best expressed as “Do unto others before they do unto you.” That ethic gets played out in relationships, of course, when fear causes us to

flee from someone before they might flee from us. And we know how that ethic gets played out nationally with the whole idea of preemption. And both of those are because we love. We love ourselves and don't want to be hurt, or we love our country and don't want to lose it, or have it suffer. We can see that tie between fear and love with the ethic of saving for a rainy day, because, of course, we love our life and want to be able to continue to enjoy it. And, of course, we see the tie between love and fear in church, too. We have fond memories of this place, of this building and everything in it. And we love it and we love our life together here as a congregation. And so, when we're confronted with big repair bills to maintain this building, or when we're confronted with shrinking numbers of youth or children, we become afraid of losing this place, of losing this family that we know and love.

So, yes we're scared, too. And we're scared for good reasons. How can we let go of those? Like the disciples, we're scared of losing things that are very valuable, of losing things we love. Listen to Jesus again. Jesus knows that fear is just the shadow side of love. And so, he would teach his disciples to fear the right thing because they love the right thing, and therefore to be able to let go of all their other fears. Says Jesus, "Save your fear for God, who holds your entire life—body and soul-- in his hands." That is, save your fear for losing the One who is the source of your life itself, who is the source of all your other loves and who therefore is worthy of your greatest love and affection. Let your only fear be the fear of losing the One who gives your life its ultimate meaning!

See, this is not the manipulative fear God slogans you find on some misguided supposedly Christian t-shirts. You know, the "It is a Dreadful Thing to Fall into the Hands of the Living God: Repent or Perish" shirt, the one sporting a skull with 666 imprinted on the forehead? No, you see these words of Jesus are in the context of "What's the price of a ... canary?" "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?" "And God cares what happens to it even more than you do. (God) pays even more attention to you, down to the last detail – even numbering the hairs on your head!" His words are in the context of what we are to love the most! It's the God who holds you in His hands, body and soul, who lays out the heavens like a sequined veil, who brings us up from the tomb of all the deaths we ever die and sets us on the road of life and love again. That's the One we are to learn to love the most and so losing that love for God is what we should fear. To lose that is to lose yourself, says Jesus. He would teach his disciples to fear the *right* thing, because they love the *right* thing.

Thomas Aquinas helps us understand this whole idea of the fear of God by drawing a distinction between "servile fear" and "filial fear." Servile fear is the fear of the servant who does right because he's afraid of the master's punishment. You know, it may indeed cause someone to do good, but it should not be considered a gift of God, because that's not who God is. God's power is love, and that power, the power of threat is the power of the world. Filial fear on the other hand is that of a child who fears harming their relationship with their parents more than they fear being "grounded" for doing wrong.

You see, fear of God has to do with the fear of being separated from the One in whom we know and find our life's deepest meaning. So, of course things can happen to our children in this world that we want to protect them from, because we love them. But, I guess, the question finally is, are we unable to know and see God's love and hand in our lives and in the world around us, and therefore see the world as a place where we are primarily at risk and in danger? Or, do we believe as Jesus taught us to that a loving God "holds your entire life – body and soul – in his hands? And given who God reveals himself to be in Jesus, maybe the thing to fear *more* for our children, more than talking to strangers, is that they might be in danger of growing up not knowing that hospitality is a virtue and that welcoming the stranger is welcoming Christ himself. And of course we can be hurt in relationships, but maybe the thing to fear *more* is losing the chance to know love.

As Scott Bader-Saye has said, “Marriage is an act that challenges all our fears of abandonment, rejection, and failure. To marry is to confront those fears and refuse to allow them to determine one's relationship.” And of course we all want to continue to enjoy life in our retirement at least as much as we do now, why wouldn't we? But, Jesus teaches us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” So, maybe the thing we need to fear *more* than not having enough is the possibility of becoming people incapable of letting go of our stored-up treasure to those who have needs now so that we might be the means by which God gives *them* their daily bread. And in church... of course we fear losing this place, losing what it's meant to us, losing the life we share together here. But, maybe what we need to fear *more* is that we lose the call of the One who brought us here! Maybe what we need to fear more is that someone outside our doors here in our community might never experience the love of Christ, might never know themselves deeply cared for and affirmed and celebrated because *we* didn't find a way to go out and *meet* their needs and *be* Christ to them, but instead waited for them to come to us. ...instead, worried about how to get more members for *us*, so that they could help us pay the bills and we wouldn't lose what *we* love.

Someone recently asked in regard to our Living Waters ministry, “well, is it doing any good, has it gotten any results yet?” Meaning, have any of those people come in our doors here to worship or attend Sunday School because of our efforts. Of course we fear dwindling numbers...we fear losing what we love. But, according to Jesus, maybe what we need to fear *more* is becoming people who stop giving out water, and who stop finding even better and greater ways to give ourselves away, because it's not achieving results for “us.” That's something to fear. Fear losing our souls...fear losing the call of the One who brought us here! Says Jesus, “those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. May it be so for us individually in our lives and may it be so for us as Elkton United Methodist Church.

Amen.