

Do Not Fear
St. Philip's
July 1, 2018
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Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight, O God our rock and our redeemer. *Amen*

I. Introduction

“Do not fear, only believe.” Comforting words. Words that inspire. Words that confuse. As we hear of Jesus encouraging his early followers to turn away from their fears, we are reminded that all around our community and our world today we see fear divide us. Whether on issues of immigration, trade wars, housing, taxation, the environment, and so many more, we can see fear doing its work. But let us also consider how we can follow Jesus’ call – “do not fear, only believe.”

II. Do Not Fear

We have all heard multiple sermons and read multiple commentaries on Jesus’s invitation to “fear not.” Debates

continue over exactly how many times Jesus urged his followers to give up their fears, but I think it is fair to say, many times. Whether to a group of fishermen by the Sea of Galilee hesitant about Jesus' invitation to become fishers of people, or to his disciples riding with him in an open boat in the middle of a storm, or to the witnesses to his transfiguration and later his resurrection, Jesus continually advises his followers to set aside their fears.

But in all of this, let us consider that perhaps the fear Jesus speaks of is about more than simply being afraid. Perhaps this is not like the terror prized by Robespierre during the French Revolution (informed as it was by traditional teachings about fear of God), but rather is layered with more fundamental questions about where we place our priorities. When Jesus speaks of "fear" and "being afraid," the Gospels use the Greek word *Phobos*, which means not only fear and withdrawal, but also reverence and respect. When we read in Proverbs that fear is the beginning of wisdom, perhaps we can understand that this involves more than simply our "fight or flight" reaction to immediate dangers. As the Christian

mystic Hildegard of Bingen put it, “wherever fear of God takes root, the wisdom of the human mind can be found.” The wisdom to let go.

We are invited to understand Jesus’ invitation to “fear not” as an opportunity to let go of the priorities that hold our attention. For the fear of loss is indeed an affirmation that what we stand to lose is important to us. When the prophet Isaiah urged the Israelites in exile to fear not and to know that God was with them, he seemed to juxtapose their grief over losing the comfortable traditions that Isaiah had so vigorously critiqued, with the joy to be found in embracing renewed faith in God’s redemption. Similarly, perhaps the fear that Jesus cautions against involves more than simply a reaction to threats or loss or uncertainty, but rather points to reverence for values and priorities that we really could do without. For it is the clinging to flawed priorities that our relationships with God becomes distorted. As the Desert Fathers of the 4th Century put it, “a life of ease drives out the fear of the Lord.” For even as our fears reflect worry that our

priorities will be compromised, or taken away, our fears serve to entrench those same, flawed priorities.

And so, when in today's Gospel reading from Mark (repeated in the Gospel of Luke), Jesus advised the leaders of the synagogue not to fear the illness that has taken hold of a colleague's daughter, there seems to be more going on here than simply wariness in the face of illness. Note that in those days social and religious tradition often attributed the illness of a child to the sins of the parents – recall in John's Gospel story of the man born blind, how the Pharisees asked, “who sinned, this man or his parents.” So we can appreciate that Jesus' advice in today's Gospel to “fear not” involved an invitation to be free of the norms about traditional authority that commanded fear and respect. And to rise above the derision of the crowd that seemed to reinforce such conventions – why trouble the teacher, the girl is already dead, it is laughable to say otherwise. And so, “fear not” became an invitation to discard reverence for traditional priorities and expectations, about the causes of illness and so much more.

But of course this is not merely about the disciples is it? We can appreciate that Jesus' invitation to his followers to fear not, to not be afraid, reflects an understanding that so, so much of human behavior is driven by fear. We see around us today the fear of refugees fleeing danger from violence and war in the mid-East and Central American being matched by fear among people in surrounding communities that migrants will bring their troubles with them. The fear of the dispossessed over where they will sleep is matched by the fear of housed peoples – renters and home-owners alike – that their own homes and livelihoods will be threatened. The fear that people have about pipelines and environmental threats is matched by the fears of those whose jobs and prosperity seem at risk. There seems to be plenty of fear to go around.

Fear of others, fear of change, fear of the unknown then becomes something of an existential matter of protecting one's identity and place in the world. Fear of particular challenges reflects a deeper fear of losing cherished

possessions and privileges, even cherished ideals and values. Cherished priorities. This not only condemns the fearful to lifetimes of anxiety, but makes mutual understanding and cooperation difficult, as sides are chosen and defended and those who with opposing views are shown the door. And as we see so often today, conflicts driven by fear seem insurmountable. The words of Isaiah speaking of the Exile seem to ring true: “darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples.” But as Christians we are called to seek light in that darkness. The light that comes from overcoming fear.

III. Only Believe

Seems to me that a good place to start is to overcome fear with faith. When urged to give up our fears, we are called to question where we place our priorities and expectations. When called to believe, we are invited to turn our reverence toward the things that matter.

And how are we to do this? When Jesus, speaking in today’s Gospel, tells us “do not fear, only believe,” we are invited to

understand that our faith journeys are what empower us to reject false priorities, and to direct our reverence toward the real thing, toward the Kingdom of God. So that we may be insulated from the priorities of this world so that we can imbibe of the priorities of the Kingdom. And in so doing we set an example for others, as did those courageous clergy in Los Angeles this week who chose to not fear, but to believe, who chose arrest over complicity in injustice.

And indeed the call for belief in action is affirmed in today's Epistle reading. Paul's exhortations to the Christians in Corinth to donate to the needs of Christians in Jerusalem (even to the extent of suggesting a competition between the prosperous city of Corinth and remote Macedonia to the north) suggests that it is through our acts of love and kindness that we affirm our faith. Whether we examine Jesus' affirmation of the two great commandments, or expositing the parable of the Good Samaritan, or when we look to earlier texts of the Hebrew prophets, or later to the Book of James, we find an abundance of guidance for Christians to live out – and even to find – our faith through

service to others. Another James, of the Desert Fathers, reminds us, “We do not want words alone, for there are too many words among people today. What we need is action.”

For it is in service, through parish ministries to refugees, the homeless, the needy, that we find our true priorities. We overcome fear of refugees through reverence for the calls of the prophets and Christ himself to welcome the stranger. We overcome fear of the homeless through faithful efforts to follow Jesus’ call to care for our neighbours. We overcome fear of the sick, the lonely, the hungry by emulating Jesus’ ministry of service and St. Paul’s call to give generously. Through ministry we enable our fears to be directed away from the worldly, the selfish, the short-term conditions from which those very fears spring, directing them instead toward the salvation, the redemption that comes with reverence for the Kingdom of God.

IV. Conclusion

And then . . . our faith will make us well. As he had done for the centurion’s daughter and the paralytic and the

Canaanite woman in the Gospel of Matthew, or for the woman with a hemorrhage in today's Gospel from Mark, Jesus provides healing in response to faith. And so we have the transformation that comes through faith. Our fears reflect our flawed priorities, turning from fear allows us to reorient those priorities, faith supports that change and our ministries support that faith. Freedom from fear involves more than just toughing it out, but invites us instead to allow our faith to reorient our priorities so that the fears they generate hold us no longer. And so, we are freed to commit ourselves to love and service for our neighbours. Confronting the source of our fears, focusing on faithful resistance to fear through ministries of service and love, we find healing. Do not fear, only believe – and be healed.

Let us pray: Holy One, we thank you for the invitation to shed our fears, to redirect our priorities, and to find faithful healing through service to others. We ask that your Holy Spirit continue to guide us on this journey. We pray in the name of Jesus the Christ in whom all our hopes are found.

Amen