

2021.09.26 SERMON Creation & Redemption 18 after Pentecost

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Today's readings have been on my mind this week. Thinking about how we experience darkness, the kind of darkness which makes our hearts quail... the kind that makes us forget we are loved and seems to sever our connection with the light and our faith in goodness. The kind that shakes our belief that the world is actually a safe place for us to be...

I think of a housemate I had once. She was full of life, thick curly blonde hair, a runner who at one point was an Olympic hopeful. She worked with emotionally and psychologically damaged children. One day she mentioned how they could not leave one of the kids alone with the other children. I was very curious about this. "How old is he?" "Five". "What! And he would injure the others?! Is he afraid?"

"Well yes," she said "but it's an unreasoning fear and we have to protect the other children from him." I couldn't understand this, it really startled me. She explained "He lived with his parents for the first four years of his life. They abused him horribly - that was all he knew. When they weren't tormenting him they kept him in a garbage can. All he knew was the total absence of kindness."

It makes me think of a Nanci Griffith song about people teaching their children to hate. Her words tell us how *"It's a very hard life, It's a hard life wherever you go If we poison our children with hatred Then, the hard life is all that they'll know"*

But it also makes me think of a beloved Quaker song which recounts how,
*"There's an ocean of darkness and I drown in the night
 Til I come through the darkness to the ocean of Light
 and the Light is forever, and the Light it is free
 And I walk in the glory of the Light, said he."*

Many things, many life events, can tempt us into the darkness. We are tested just as Jesus was. Or you might reverse that to... Jesus was tested as we are. We are human with Jesus. Jesus came to be human with us. Jesus came so he could help us understand. Jesus came to show us the light. Jesus came to teach us what love really means.

The Temptor does indeed come to every single one of us. When a marriage ends. When we confront a medical diagnosis that threatens to change our very identity... You know: I'm strong, I'm self-sufficient, independent. That's who I am, And then life happens to us - we're diagnosed with a life-threatening disease. Someone we love is taken from our lives. Or... the world gets turned upside down by a pandemic. Our community gets fractured by differences in how to respond to the pandemic. These

events come like a violent wind into our lives and it can be very hard to resist the darkness.

Then you know what happens. As the world turns upside down we want reassurance. We want the old order restored. We want to feel safe and in control of our lives. And as it becomes clear that we can't have any of that, we start to feel vulnerable. Uncomfortably vulnerable and at risk. We don't know from which direction danger might come. We get scared. Maybe we mask our fear with anger, but underneath...? Fear. And other kinds of fear come tromping into our lives to wreak havoc and keep us awake at night? Fears based in scarcity... A fear of not enough. A fear that we are not enough OR we won't have enough, right? Not enough money, not enough love, not enough strength to get through. Or we might fear we are not smart enough or beautiful enough or fabulous enough. It's enough (!) to make your stomach hurt isn't it! Oh and lets not forget the fear of making mistakes or being wrong. YIKES!

Here's the deal - FEAR ITSELF IS NOT EVIL. Fear is a normal aspect of being human. It keeps us from burning our fingers on the hotplate. From stepping in front of speeding cars. I think what's really dangerous about fear is being afraid of it. What does *the fear of fear* do to us? It shrinks our souls. It makes us live small. It stops us from believing in our own capacity to change the world for the better. Sadly, I think it stops us from loving and shining our light. But worst of all it stops us from believing in our own essential goodness. All of us. Our ability to be good as individuals and as a community. It shuts down our thinking. It shuts down our capacity to question, to seek truth. Being afraid of fear can persuade us to go along with things we know really aren't right. But - here's the gold - if we question the fear it can become a map for our return through darkness into the light.

How does that work? Over and over again in the bible we hear Jesus tell us "do not be afraid." But is that enough? Are the words of Jesus sufficient to end our being afraid? Maybe not. But we have other antidotes to fear, don't we. First one - love. Second one - prayer. What else serves as an antidote to fear?... a rock solid belief in goodness. Which doesn't mean denying the existence of evil. But it does mean believing that goodness will prevail. Acceptance of fear says, Yes, fear is real but I will not allow it be a deterrent to my living. Laughter - laughter sends fear reeling off into the darkness. Community. Whether we mean standing together or being willing to ask our community for help when things threaten to overwhelm us. Simply to be there for each other. Not to rescue, not to fix one another but to be an ally, a companion who does not waver. That is another way we conquer the darkness of fear.

So cleave to the light. Choose love. Choose justice. Choose mercy. Do no evil, do no harm. Ask for help when you need it. Understand we are imperfect. We will make mistakes. We will be mistaken. “Let us humbly confess before our God...” Not just a formula to be repeated, but the real deal. ‘Cause being humble, making our confession, admitting wrongdoing – all this is one more huge doorway to cleansing the heart from this darkness. Cleansing the heart of fear.

Yes, evil exists, And we get to say no to it. And yes, sometimes we will need help. AND yes help is available. We can ask God. That one-word-prayer – “Help.” We can ask a friend or a loved one. Why would that be enough? Because there is light inside each and every one of us. And when that light gets squelched or shadowed by hard things all it takes is another light shining to restore its strength. So my sisters and brothers. shine your light. For yourselves, for each other.

Amen.