

“Casting Out Fear”

1 John 4:13-21

March 22, 2020

One of my favorite preachers tells a story about the time she was invited by a friend, a wise old priest, to speak at his church in Alabama. When she asked what he wanted her to talk about, the priest answered, “Come tell us what is saving your life right now.”¹ Easy enough, right? All she had to do was figure out what her life depended on. I’ve been thinking about that question quite a bit during this week when life-saving has become front-and-center both around the globe and close to home.

All of us have new and previously unconsidered answers to that clarifying question. What is saving our lives? The wisdom and intelligence of doctors and scientists. The courage, compassion, and sacrificial service of medical professionals. The love of neighbors and strangers. The practices of good public health that demonstrate care for ourselves and those around us—washing our hands and keeping our distance. Even this empty sanctuary stands today as a life-saving symbol.

It is already cliché to say that we are in an unprecedented time, at least for every person living through this global pandemic. We are surrounded by a cloud of uncertainty and there is no clear path ahead. No one can tell us what happens next or for how long it will last. And yet, even in an unprecedented time, we have a choice. We can turn our attention to what is draining us of life and zapping our spiritual energy—each of us could make a long list and, at the top of the list would be fear. These days, fear abounds. If we allow it to, fear will rule our lives, even take our lives. Whether real or imagined, rational or groundless, our fears tend to snowball, taking on a life of their own. And that life can choke off ours.

Fear is natural for we limited human creatures who cannot see the future or know for sure what will happen

next. Have you ever noticed how almost every time a messenger of God appears to a human in Scripture, no matter what the message or the call, the first words spoken are these: Do not be afraid. Or, in the King James Version, “Fear not.” Sixty-three times God speaks these words in Scripture. Here’s what I think. The One who created us, the One who loves us most, knows that our most common response to unprecedented events, especially those that pose danger, is fear. And so this message is put on repeat—encouraging us to trust God with an unknown future, to lean on God’s strength when the valleys are low and the light is dim.

Even, maybe especially, in those places there is a promise--the Gospel promise that there is more to life than fear. There is this call to embrace the abundant love of God and to live deeply out of that love instead of our fears. This is the alternative that we have been given—to love in the face of fear.

The prophet Micah crafted a compelling vision of God’s coming kingdom. He painted a vivid picture of what the world could be—swords beaten into plows, weapons of war turned into tools for cultivation, each person is given a sense of security and a promise of peace. At its heart, Micah’s vision of God’s desire is summarized in these powerful words, “And no one shall make them afraid.” Imagine how the world would be transformed if no one and nothing could make us afraid. Imagine how differently we might see the future if we trusted that the power of fear will one day be defeated. That is the promise of the prophet. Even though we cannot see it now, a day is coming when fear will be no more.

The brief letter we call First John is filled with encouragement for those who stand at a crossroads in their lives of faith. These words are written to an

early Christian community who had been told to fear God's wrath and anticipate God's judgment. Though their fears were different from our own, they were no less damaging to a life of discipleship. For anxious and worried people, John has a simple remedy. Love. Love is the cure for fear. As William Sloane Coffin preached a generation ago: the opposite of love is not hate. The opposite of love is fear. There is no fear in love. The Letter of John uses forceful, aggressive language to describe the effect of love on the power of fear. Love does not nudge fear out of the way. Love casts out fear. Throws it away. Discards it. Dumps it. Chucks it. Ditches it. Axes it. You get the point. Love is what makes fear go away.

It is not simply the command, "Fear not," that expels our terror. A friend often reminds me that "never in the history of calming down has anyone ever calmed down by being told to calm down." The same is true of fear. What vanquishes fear is not a command, telling us what to do. It is what God does. God makes a home among us, abides with us, loves us without condition or expiration. The love of God defeats the fear we bear. And, since God's love casts out fear, then we are called to overcome our fear by cultivating love for others. And how do we this? We do it together. John is clear—if our greatest calling is to love God, the only way we do that is by loving the people God places in our lives. When we fail to love other human beings, we have failed to love God. If you want to cast out fear, do not seek the imagined security of weapons or surrender to the temptation to withdraw from those in need. Instead, deepen your commitment to love.

This commitment is woven into our spiritual DNA. Last Friday, a colleague reminded me that "in the days of the early church, a plague of dysentery racked the Roman Empire. When people contracted dysentery, they were put out of their homes and left for dead. An act of fear and self-protection. In the midst of this grim reality, Christians would take in those with dysentery, keep them warm and give them fluids—which, in fact, is the best treatment for dysentery. It was the greatest evangelism effort of the early church. People thought it was a miracle; they thought that these Christians

were miracle workers. It was just love. Just compassion. In other words, it *was* a miracle."ⁱⁱ Friends, if we can harness the power of love in these unprecedented times then this somber and scary time might just prove to be our finest hour. Right now, if you want to defeat fear, love one another. If it seems simple—that's because it is. If it seems easy, then you haven't really tried it. The truth is that fear is powerful. The only thing in this world strong enough to defeat it is love.

This week, my email inbox has been overflowing with examples in this faith community of people who are choosing to love in the face of fear. From members who chose to make a significant financial gift in this moment because they trust the church will use it well. From a mother who wrote asking for the mailing address of elderly members since her daughter had some extra time and is a gifted note writer. From the dozens of members who purchased games and art supplies for the students at Greenbriar Elementary School. From preschool teachers who sent pictures and stories and jokes to homebound students. From the volunteers who keep showing up to provide food to an increasing number of our neighbors through the Northside Food Pantry. From the one who had foraged stores looking for remaining household supplies and then passed them on to the church to distribute. From members who responded to my email message on prayer with prayers of their own for the world, our church, and even for my family. From church staff who stretched beyond their comfort zones to record video devotions to spread light and hope and keep us all connected. These are things that are saving my life right now—beacons of love in the face of fear. Acts of compassion that press against encroaching anxiety. Only love can cast out our fears—and we can choose to love. This week, come what may, we can choose love over fear.

This morning, I want to say what you already know is true, what you have taught me this week. I want to say that love is God's essence. I want to say that the purpose of faithful living is to grow to be more loving. I want to say that the promise of faith is that, no matter what may come, love wins. It conquers fear and scarcity and division. It crosses every boundary. It tears down every

barrier. It extends beyond every limitation. This is the Gospel. Fear not. Live faithfully. Love courageously. Beloved, we can do this. It's who we are. Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*.

ⁱⁱ Thanks to Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana for sharing this through her email reflection and blog, *The Blue Room*.