

The Fear Factor

Series: Discipleship with Integrity; 1 John 4: 7-8, 18a

Mother's Day, though not exactly a religious observance, comes pretty close for many. This attitude reflects a special reverence for motherhood. It's not that every mother is perfect, but we recognize the centrality of the mother's role. Mothers bring life into the world. They are usually the primary nurturers of young lives.

There is a fitting connection with today's theme of fear. Mothers comfort us in the face of fear. They also teach us the deep meaning of fear, sometimes they give us a good reason to be afraid!

Today's teaching is titled *The Fear Factor*. It's not a very original title, based on the TV program. On the show, people confront their fear of heights, speed, snakes, bugs, and eating gross things. That's not what I have in mind today, however.

Let's turn first to the scripture passage that inspired this title and this teaching: 1 John 4: 7-8, 18a. "Beloved, let us love one another, since love is of God. Everyone who loves has been begotten by God and knows God." One of Jesus' very few commandments in the Gospels is, "love one another". 1 John follows that command, saying in effect, "let us do it!" Love embodies the divine. It also gives humanity the quality of being like God.

Verse eight is simply a restatement of verse seven, but in the negative: not knowing love means knowing nothing of God because "God is love". Love is an image for God. God is light. God is Spirit. Images are ways for our finite minds and vocabularies to describe what is indescribable. God, being itself, is most clearly described using our human concept of love.

Let's jump to verse eighteen: "Love has no room for fear; rather, perfect love drives out fear". In other words, "fear is just not present in love". Love is perfect in its wholeness and connectedness when God is in us completely. Intimate relationship with God is the perfection of love. There is no room and no need for fear. This is the good news through Jesus: no fear. Where the presence of the Lord is fully experienced, there is just no room for fear.

This Easter season, I am doing a sermon series called *Discipleship with Integrity*. Once you get past the acronym DWI, the point is pretty simple: how do we follow Jesus in a way that is meaningful for us, transformational for our relationships, and redemptive for the world?

When we are confronted with the reality of God, however conceived, and we choose to follow the way of Jesus, the most likely direction for us is to commit to church involvement. What then? The best option in response to the "what then" question is to choose discipleship with integrity. This means living open to life that is full of the mysteries of the universe. It means being closely connected to the life force, yet without fear.

When you choose to be a follower of Jesus, a disciple, you choose to be a learner. You choose to learn to live with freedom. You choose to learn to be empowered. You choose to learn to engage your sacred imaginations to shape what your lives, and the life of this church, can be. Being a disciple means learning to live with confidence in the mystery of what God is doing with us and through us.

Being a disciple means learning to deal with life's challenges. It means learning to deal with change in our lives, changes in the church, and changes in the world. It means learning not to back away from what change means for us and to find a way to be blessed in the changes.

Today's topic is learning to deal with fear. Many of you are familiar with the Enneagram, a system that recognizes nine different life energies within people, nine different types of people. So which one is the "fear" type? Sixes are generally seen as the fear type in the

Enneagram system. This is true to an extent because sixes have particular struggles around the issues of fear. Yet, all of us face the challenge of dealing with fear. Very often it is fear that underlies other feelings such as anger. If I may be so bold, of what are you afraid? What scares you?

Many of our fears are well founded in response to real dangers. We sometimes fear the consequences of our actions. We can also fear rejection or even not receiving the approval we crave. What's behind those fears? Of what are we really afraid? What is the source of our deep fear?

Wise people tell us that, as human beings, our deepest fears are related to our self-consciousness, an awareness of our own mortality, a fear of that there is no ultimate meaning to our lives and our existence. Referring again to the Enneagram, the approach to its interpretation that I find especially meaningful sees each energy, (each number, each person) standing alone to face our deepest fear. We look on life's abyss with the challenge to stand there without shrinking back or running away. As people of faith, we are able to stand facing our deepest fear, and still able to stand, because of our faith. We trust God's existence and God's presence with us, not always to rescue us from pain or even death, but to provide meaning and hope so that we can continue to stand.

Some people stand facing their deepest fears honestly and without self-deception. These people are rare. I have done that on occasion, though not very often and not for very long. I have done it sometimes. I'm sure you have done it sometimes. Fear remains a powerful part of my life. My fears have their basis in existential anxiety: a fear of death, of being alone, of there being no meaning to my existence, and of feeling powerless in the face of outside forces.

I see it more clearly now, this deep fear beneath my everyday fears. In my life, I fear such things as not being accepted and approved, not being affirmed, and feeling powerless. Seeing that these reflect the deeper fears, those shared by all of us, helps me as I anticipate facing my everyday fears, so that the choices I make each day do not need to be determined by them.

What do we fear as a congregation, here at Crossroads Church? I get the feeling that fear pushes our life more than we want it to do. Sometimes, fear causes us to speak harshly to or about each other. At other times, fear pushes us to avoid confronting others in loving honesty.

There is a cost to having your life determined by fear. What is that cost in your life? There is a cost to having fear call the shots in a family's life. What is that cost in your most intimate relationships? There is a cost to having a community's life, or a nation's life, largely determined by fear. What is that cost for this community? What is the cost for our nation?

What is the role of love in facing our fear? "Do not be afraid," the Bible tells us. True love casts out fear. How can we observe the directive not to be afraid? How can we appropriate the promise that true love casts out fear without denying the reality of our fears? How can we embrace that promise without deceiving ourselves because fear does guide so many of our decisions?

The New Testament portion of the Bible is a first-century interpretation of the impact of Jesus in the lives of his followers, his disciples. It is not the source of "simple answers" to our daily questions. The Bible interprets the big questions of life in light of what God did through Jesus. It addresses the big picture of our fears: of existential anxiety, the fear of death or of being alone, the fear that there is no meaning to my existence and that I am powerless in the face of greater life forces.

The Bible and our faith tradition proclaim clearly that the power of death has disappeared: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" They tell us that our

existence does have meaning in the source of all meaning, the ground of all being, whom we meet most clearly in Jesus. It encourages us that we are not powerless when we place our trust in the ultimate power of life.

Remember the message of the cross. Through this sign of ultimate weakness, God has overcome all powers of evil and of darkness. "Fear not, I have overcome the world."

This One whose very nature is characterized by our human concept of love, this One defeats death and grants meaning to our lives as a gift. The one we follow empowers us to have intimate relationship with God.

True love casts out fear. There is no room for the deep fear in the presence of perfect love. But here's the catch. Armed with this knowledge and supported by faith, we have the task of living with our everyday fears. You and I get to work out the everyday responses and the daily choices of the individual and communal paths we walk. Let us be encouraged to let go of fear when it blinds us to the truth. Let us be strengthened in our everyday walk of faith by those who have walked the journey so faithfully, so courageously, and with so much love.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said these words when he accepted his Nobel Peace prize in 1964:

I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. ... This faith can give us courage to face the uncertainties of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom. When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds and our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, we will know that we are living in the creative turmoil of a genuine civilization struggling to be born.

King also wrote to fellow clergy, in his Letters from a Birmingham jail, reminding our generation, as well as his own, that we will only find the perfect love we seek in God and within ourselves, in the community around us, when we look to reach out to the community around us, and when we learn to love each other no matter our race, our creed, our gender, our sexual orientation, or our nationality. He quoted this little poem by an unknown author:

"I sought my soul, but my soul I could not see. I sought my God, but God eluded me. I sought my brother, and found all three."

"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God; ... for God [who is our Mother as well as our Father, God] is love."