

Of What Are You Afraid?

Mark 8:31-38

If you've been to our house, you know we have a pretty high ceiling in the living room. There are two spotlights recessed in that ceiling with bulbs that need replacing from time to time. Now, I don't like heights especially or climbing ladders. I can honestly say I am afraid of heights, at least somewhat. I usually deal with my fear of heights by not doing, by putting off climbing up ladders to replace light bulbs in high places. I put that task off until I find someone else to climb up there for me. I'm very good at spotting – holding the ladder in place while someone else climbs up. That's what I did yesterday and, thanks to Alex, our house now has new light bulbs way up in the living room ceiling. And I have a story with which to begin this teaching.

Some people are not afraid of heights, but everyone seems to be afraid of something. In many ways, to be afraid is to be alive – I fear, therefore I am! Certainly to be human is to know fear.

What scares you? Of what are you afraid -- really afraid? What is it that inspires deep fear in you? Mostly, our fears may be reasonable in a big picture sort of way. We often fear what may indeed cause us pain, threaten our lives, threaten our well being, represent a threat of danger to those we love. Our fears may be well founded. Many of the things I have been afraid were going to happen have indeed happened. Fear does not stop bad things from happening even to very good people.

Unfortunately, it seems that scary events often come true. Pain happens. People die and we, too, will face that someday. I don't mean to be maudlin or frightening, but very often what frightens us most is the future we know is coming. Fear can disable us or it can prepare us, depending on how we respond. That is why our response to fear is so important.

In the Gospels, Jesus spent almost all of his public time either healing or teaching. Both activities had the same end: to change how people viewed life and how they lived their lives. In gospel lesson, Jesus has just turned around and challenged the disciples: "Who do you say that I am?" Peter evidently got the answer right. He said the right thing, "You are the Messiah, the Son of God." He identified Jesus as the one coming from God to reveal God to Israel. In response, Jesus tried to teach the disciples again about his true purpose, Peter didn't like it. What was that purpose and why did Peter react the way he did?

The answer to why Peter reacted as he did seems to be a very human one. He was afraid. How do you react when you get scared? It has been said that people are either skunks or turtles. When frightened, they either spray all over the place or withdraw into a shell. Some people are skunks. They get angry. They fight. Other people are turtles. They withdraw. They run away emotionally and sometimes physically.

How did the disciples react? The big twelve really did pretty poorly. Peter, clearly a skunk, took Jesus aside and criticized him. The others, evidently, just clammed up – or maybe *turtled* up! Judas, we find out later, was more passive aggressive. He betrayed Jesus in the dark of night with a kiss.

And what was the *way* Jesus was teaching them? It was that he, Jesus, “must undergo great suffering,” not because there is anything beneficial in suffering itself, but because suffering is what often happens when you challenge entrenched power. That’s what happens when you challenge the violent with non-violence.

Jesus invited everyone to follow his way. “He called the crowd with his disciples.” This was the whole crowd, both the twelve and others who followed, “and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Jesus’ invitation – “Let’s go everyone -- to Jerusalem. We’ll go representing the present kingdom of God that is the alternative to the kingdom of Caesar. The kingdom of God is a kingdom not of achievement, but of relationship -- not domination, but compassion. It is a kingdom where love is the standard, deeds of kindness and mercy the currency, wealth is measured in love. “Let’s go even knowing we face violence and probably death, but we’ll go knowing that to do otherwise is to never live at all.

Jesus’ invitation is: “those who want to save their life will lose it” by not standing up every day for justice, for peace, and for love. “Those who lose their life for my sake, and the sake of the gospel” means they lose their life by giving it to follow the way of Jesus. That means they “will save it.”

What matters in our living is that we act according to our deepest convictions. These are convictions that emerge from the core of our being: from relationship with God and not from the influences of the culture around us, of others around us or from the need to please or to assert our will. “What will it profit us to gain the whole world and forfeit our life” grasping for what does not matter?

There is nothing more important than how we live our lives. We live in a time in which it is hard to know where to invest important items such as our life savings. It is a perfect time to stop, take a deep breath, step back, and realize what’s important: relationship with those we love and meaningful activity. It is important to manage the use of our time, talents, and treasures so that those we love can live, but how much of our worrying goes far beyond these basics? How often do we find ourselves seeking safety and meaning in places where it just can’t be found?

Jesus tells us: “don’t allow the fear of what is not vital control your actions. Instead, live according to what you say you believe.” And if we want to follow Jesus, the cross is the way. We need to own our fear: acknowledge it, name it, and recognize our reaction of fear. Then we need to hold that fear together with faith, in relationship with God -- like Jesus. Fear can begin to lose its hold on us

Holding fear with faith means this: choosing to step decisively in the direction of what you value most in life – toward your call. It means trusting ultimately in who you are and where you want most to go. It means to go knowing that this way will cost you something: money, time, energy, reputation, or upward mobility. These treasures, so valued by our culture, ultimately are of little worth. Jesus followed the road to Jerusalem, counting life itself as of little value compared to following God’s invitation to live abundantly. He invites us to walk with him.

As we move along a pathway of discovering and living out of a sense of call -- toward what engages us at the point of our passion, what brings us joy – we will find that to live life that way can reveal how shallow most of our fears really are. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously said, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself!” Now, *fear itself* is quite formidable, yet fear is not ultimately the problem. Besides, it doesn’t usually work trying to talk yourself out of feeling afraid.

Let your fear point you to your deeper self – the core of who you are. Author Elizabeth O’Connor reminds us that a sure sign we are operating at the periphery of our lives is when we are working primarily “for the approval of others... with the haunting possibility that we will not live up to their actual or imagined expectations. “To the degree that this feeling takes over, we abandon ourselves, and spontaneity and and creativity die in us. (Eliz.O’Connor, *Eighth Day of Creation*)

The disciples failed out of fear, but failure was not the last word for almost all of them. We, too, can let our fear, and our reactions to that fear, motivate us to let go of the *false self* we may be borrowing by living for the approval of others. We find our example by following Jesus.

Fear is a narrow gate onto a winding road – the journey of life. In times of crisis, we, like Jesus, often pray for the cup of suffering, the cup of fear, and the cup of change to pass us by. But this cup is our opportunity to move deeper into relationship with God. It is the opportunity to become more the person – or congregation -- we have the potential to be. We can only navigate that journey by faith.

True church exists only on the Jesus’ way – the way of the cross. Church exists to help each of us deal with fear by faith and to become all we can be on the journeys of our lives. It can be a lonely road, but we will never walk it alone.