

“What if...we acted as if we weren't afraid?”

What if...we acted as if we weren't afraid? Our third week in our What if...sermon series brings us to a question that many of us deal with. The idea of fear. Now, the idea of fear has many connotations. There are people who are afraid of spiders, clowns, or flying. There are people who are afraid of commitment. There are people who are afraid of falling because they are in bad health and are a little bit wobbly on their feet. To have a fear does not mean that one is irrational. To have fear is to recognize that there is something in your life that bothers you. Fear is normal, but as people of faith, we cannot let our fears overtake us or hinder our living.

There are other ways that we are fearful. After September 11, 2001, people in our country were afraid. We were afraid of another terror attack. We were afraid of the anthrax spread through our mail system. These were rational fears. But then we moved past the actual fears and moved into fears that created a society of hatred and judgment.

People then started judging all individuals of the Islamic faith by a handful of extremists. Others started judging people walking down the

street dressed differently than us as bad and hateful and dangerous.

Some individuals make snap decisions about stereotypes of people that might “look” Hispanic or speak Spanish and ask the question in their minds if they are “legal” or not. There are still people who shake their heads at two men walking down the street holding hands in a relationship. These are just some of the times when we let our fears define who we are and hurt our relationships with our fellow human beings. A simple fear of people that are different than us or those that may not act, speak, believe, or love like we do.

We need to take our fears, those things that define and change us and possibly make us hateful, hurtful people, and turn that into love. We need to learn not to judge others, but to share in the love of God for all people and let us not be living in fear just because of differences.

We can also be afraid in our faith. We are afraid that God won't be there when we need God. We are afraid that we won't get the right answer from the doctor. We are afraid that God will leave us if we make mistakes or if we are sinful. We are afraid that because we haven't

come to church in a long time, we will not still be loved by God and by the people that also come to worship and praise God together.

I am a huge fan of cop shows. *Bones*, *Law and Order*, *Blue Bloods*. They are my late night, relaxation time to forget about the world and all of its problems. Yes, I recognize the irony in watching shows about murder and death and terrorism with our current state of the world, but at least they are “make believe.”

What I do find interesting is watching these shows about kids and people in the cities and in other cultures different from my small town American understanding...even though we are close to Reading City and really a suburb of that city and even close to places like Philadelphia, Allentown, Baltimore, and New York, we can still have a very small understanding of Urban life. A few weeks ago, I was watching an episode and the kids at a shelter were all afraid to admit to what they saw because of what might happen to them if they squealed. These kids were living in fear to speak up.

We sometimes live in fear to speak up. As people of faith in a very difficult time in our country there is some very controversial topics that

people on both sides are very passionate about. There are issues with gun control, immigration, racism, LGBT rights, the opioid epidemic, and sexism; not to mention the economy and jobs that are all affecting everything else. As people of faith, we are called to action. It can be difficult to act with so many problems going on in the world, but we should not live in fear of speaking up because we can make a difference. We should not be afraid to take a stand and have an opinion and even if that opinion is different than our friends, neighbors, or family, we should still be open to listening to one another and working with one another because that is what we are called to do. To do the work of God without living in fear. The church is the BEST!!! Place to start these types of conversation. Not political conversations, but discussions where we listen to one another and can discuss the best way to support those on the margins and those that don't have a voice for themselves.

The scriptures that I have chosen for this morning give us some encouragement. Our Gospel text from John is a wonderful scripture that allows us to see the plan that God has had for Jesus. In this text, Jesus knew that he was on the way to the cross. He knew that he still had

work to do on this earth, but that it was going to be done through his disciples and his followers. He knew that he was not going to be in this world much longer. So, not only did God have a plan for Jesus, but Jesus made his own plans for the future.

The disciples and the first followers of Jesus also had fears. They had fears that they would also be captured and tried and hung on the cross in the immediate days and weeks after Jesus' death. They had fears that they would not be accepted in places that they would go preaching the Good News. These fears were realized for many people throughout history who sacrificed themselves because of what they believed.

These fears are still being dealt with today. There are still people in various countries throughout the world that are afraid to live out their faith for fear of persecution or death. However, these disciples were told by Jesus in the Gospel of John that they will have an advocate, the Holy Spirit to come and be with them.

As people of faith who follow the scriptures for the guiding of our lives, we usually put ourselves in the place of the disciples. That is easy

to do when the disciples are happily listening to stories and watching the miracles happen and even when they are being promised that they will have help in the form of the Holy Spirit it can be easy. It isn't easy to associate ourselves with those disciples is when they are living in fear.

John 14 begins by saying , "Do not be worried or upset" I love these words from John. Don't worry. Don't live in fear of what might happen. Don't stress about the things in life that you cannot control.

The second part of this Gospel lesson is so important as well. It is the place where Jesus tells his disciples about the Holy Spirit who will come and help them. Now the disciples still are not aware of what is going to be happening to Jesus. They do not fully understand the importance of some of these speeches, but Jesus is able to explain to the disciples that they will be helped. That they will not be alone, even when Jesus is gone.

Verse 27 shows Jesus bringing peace. "Peace is what I give to you. The peace is what I leave with you" Not only is Jesus bringing the peace, but he is leaving the peace with them. He is giving of himself to bring peace to the disciples. Not just the peace of Christ to share with

others, but an inner peace to understand and to appreciate their situation, especially after Jesus has been crucified.

The Gospel then continues, "Do not be worried or upset, do not be afraid." Here Jesus repeats what he said in verse 1, but then also adds, do not be afraid. Jesus is telling his disciples to not be afraid. This is a blanket "do not be afraid." Do not be afraid when I am not here anymore. Do not be afraid that you too will be captured and crucified. Do not be afraid that you will not find food or shelter on your journey for the faith.

Now, Jesus could not have predicted the distant future for us today, but we could think that Jesus was also saying, "Do not be afraid to stand up and fight for those that are different from you. Do not be afraid to share your faith even in our difficult world of today. Do not be afraid to take some time for church on a Sunday or committee work on a Tuesday evening or an extra dollar in the offering plate." Jesus gives us support through the Holy Spirit throughout all of our tasks.

Another passage that I meditated on throughout this week was from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. I saw this passage tattooed

onto a professional football players arm a long time ago and I looked it up because I was curious to know what would be helpful for a football player. It turned out to be this passage which I find to be my go-to scripture and probably is considered my favorite. Philippians 4:13 says in various translations, "I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me." Our Good News Translation is a little bit different, but has the same result, "I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me."

Christ gives us the power to face our fears. Christ gives us the ability and the guidance through the Holy Spirit to not be afraid. Paul was writing this letter to this particular church and we can believe that there was probably something going on specifically that made him write in this way. This passage shows that not only does Christ give us strength, but Christ gives us each other for strength.

The final part of the John text for this morning brings me to my final statement. Jesus says, Come, let us go from this place. Chapters 14-17 of John are considered Jesus' farewell discourse and comes right after the Last Supper. He says to go from this place. Jesus is moving

them on to the next step of the journey that he knows is going to be his crucifixion, but Jesus is also telling his disciples to move on from this place of fear.

In this entire chapter, John is writing the story of Jesus telling them not to be afraid. I bring you peace. Then he ends by saying to go out into the world and take that peace. Take those fears and put them behind you.

Now, you may have some fear of something like I mentioned at the beginning of my sermon like spiders or snakes or clowns or something like that and many people have something that they are afraid of. But we cannot let our fears keep us from doing the work of the church and the work that we are called to do. We cannot let the fears within our society and the judgment and the racism overtake us because we are afraid of people that are different than us. We cannot be afraid to speak up for what we believe in. All of this we can do because we have the strength of Christ within us and the power of the Holy Spirit behind us and the loving compassion of God beside us.

Do not live in fear. Live in faith. What if...we acted as if we weren't afraid? We could change the world! Amen.