

ISermon 122715 Fear

Scripture Psalm 23, Mark 13: 33-37

Sermon Title- Do Not Be Afraid

I had planned to give a sermon today on the subject of gifts. It was a nice little message picking up on the Christmas time theme. However, our country seems to be caught up in fear these days. I decided to set aside my gifts sermon and preach today on the subject of fear.

I had someone ask me what phrase shows up in the Bible most often. I said, "Are you wondering or is this a quiz?" He said that he knew and wanted to see if I knew. I guessed, 'Love your neighbor.' He said, "Not even close." I suddenly was not enjoying myself. I said, "Okay smarty pants, what phrase shows up most often in Scripture." He said, "Do not be afraid." I went back to my office and checked. Not only was he right but he was also right that no other phrase is even close. It shows up most often when people find themselves in the divine presence. For example, the angel Gabriel says it when he comes to tell Mary that she will mother the Christ.

Fear seems to have overtaken people's thinking these days. People are afraid of terrorist attacks. People are afraid of members of different religions. People are afraid of flying commercial. But fear goes way beyond that. People are afraid of losing their jobs, their homes, their spouse, their health and on and on.

Fear is like a virus that gets into people that takes over not just their bodies, but their minds and emotions. If you are acting out of fear you cannot think straight. Rational thought and common

sense have no chance against fear. When fear is in people simple facts like you are more likely to be hit by lightening than die or be injured in a terrorist attack just bounces off.

I would like to share with you what I consider to be a tragic story. There was a woman to whom I was related by marriage. She was an Italian-American who still had family in the ancestral hometown in Italy. She had her plane ticket to take the trip of a lifetime to Italy to among other things visit her family.

Then, a terrorist bomb blew up Pan Am flight 103 on Dec 21, 1988 over Lockerbie, Scotland killing all on board and 11 on the ground. The woman was so gripped by fear; she canceled her trip and passed away never having gone to her ancestral home. To me, that is such a sad story. When fear prevents someone from living his or her life it is tragic.

Much of human prejudice is fear based. If someone or some group is different from you, whether a different race, or ethnic group, or religion and there is little or no knowledge of the other, fear takes over. It is easy to hear a report on what one evil person or a few evil people might do and make the leap to judge all of the people in that group based on the actions of a few. That is how prejudice begins. Then you get someone in a high profile position who is fear mongering and it feeds the flames of prejudice.

Certainly white people do not wanted to be painted with the same brush as the white supremacists that blow up synagogues, mosques, black churches. Nor do Christians want to be lumped in with the terrorists that shoot up abortion clinics. Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you.

Even the language used by the media is prejudicial. When there is black violence on whites they are called ‘thugs.’ When there is Muslim perpetrated violence they are called ‘terrorists.’ When there is white violence perpetrated on blacks like the creep who shot up a Bible study in Charleston, he is called ‘troubled.’

Those of you who are old enough remember the terrible attacks on this country on September 11, 2001. Remember the phrase that was on everybody’s lips? It was, ‘If we stop living our lives the way we have been, then the terrorists win.’ In other words, keep having the ball games, and going out to dinner with friends, and go to church, and go to a show because if we don’t the terrorists accomplished what they set out to do, which is to make us too fearful to function. And by the way, since that attack and many others, we are still here and still living our lives, as we should. Maybe in this fear filled time we should go back to that phrase, ‘If we stop living our lives normally, the terrorists win.’

So, fear is debilitating. It is a crippling virus that can destroy individuals and entire groups of people. It was Franklin Delano Roosevelt who in time of crisis said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” The great man got that right. So what can we do to face down fear? What can we do to stop fear from ruling us? I think there are a number of things.

Jesus tells us in this morning’s gospel, “Be on guard, stay awake.” (Mk 13: 33) As you go about your daily life and you are in public places, be watchful and alert. I remember an experience when I was single. I love blues music and was at a crowded blues club in Quincy. I was with a date. I happen to notice a guy who arrived in the crowded club who appeared to have been drinking. I also noticed a handgun in a holster under his jacket. I quietly told the

owner who was tending bar and the police officer on detail then left with my date. Just be alert and watchful.

Another strategy to combat fear is to take a good look at yourself to watch for any prejudices you might have. Yes, there are evil and hateful people in the world, but to judge an entire group on the actions of a few is dangerous for all.

Another strategy to combat fear is to restore your faith in humanity. Martin Luther King Jr. said it much better than I ever could. He said, "I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word."

Another strategy to combat fear is to remember our lessons from the Lord. Rather than viewing others with fear and suspicion, Jesus calls us to love, be compassionate, forgiving, and generous. Have the courage to be the person that Jesus wants you to be.

Another way to combat fear is to follow the advice of Max Ehrman in his piece called Desiderata:

*Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence.*

*As far as possible without surrender be on good terms with all persons.*

*Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even the dull and ignorant; they too have their story.*

*Avoid loud and aggressive persons; they are vexations to the spirit.*

*If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter;*

*for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.*

*Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans.*

*Keep interested in your career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.*

*Exercise caution in your business affairs; for the world is full of trickery.*

*But let this not blind you to what virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals;*

*and everywhere life is full of heroism.*

*Be yourself.*

*Especially, do not feign affection.*

*Neither be critical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment it is as perennial as the grass.*

*Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth.*

*Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with imaginings.*

*Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness. Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself.*

*You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars;*

*you have a right to be here.*

*And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.*

*Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive God to be, and whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul.*

*With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be careful. Strive to be happy.*

Finally, to combat fear remember this... you are loved. Your family, your friends, your church, and your God love you. Remember the words to your favorite Psalm, "Yea thought I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me." Do not be afraid. AMEM