

Fear? Or Love?

C-Proper 7, Gal. 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

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Sermon Theme: Following Jesus and pursuing the pathway to Abundant Life is often scary because it always stretches us to meet and connect with people who are “not our normal friends,” but the rewards of expanding our world and our family of faith are truly Abundant.

Children's Sermon:

What is “self-interest”? Thinking about yourself. Is it good or bad? What is “selflessness”? Thinking about others. Is selflessness good or bad? What did Jesus teach about “self-interest” and “selflessness”? “Love your neighbor, as yourself.” Does Jesus want us to love our neighbor or love ourselves? Both!

If you don’t love and take care of yourself, and then you treat your neighbor like you treat yourself, is that good? Is that what Jesus wants? No. Jesus knows that we cannot be good friends, good neighbors, good brothers or sisters, if we don’t first love ourselves and take care of ourselves. We need to eat well and rest well and exercise and learn for us to be healthy and capable of really loving our neighbor or friend or brother or sister.

But what if we only think about ourselves and spend all our time and energy on taking care of ourselves. How’s that going to work? We won’t have any real friends. We won’t be sharing the love of Jesus. We won’t be happy. There is a balance here. We need to love and take care of ourselves, AND we need to love and take care of our neighbors and friends. According to Jesus that is what will make our lives really rich and fruitful and abundant. If we only focus on ourselves; we will be miserable. If we only focus on others, we will be miserable, and not have the energy and vitality to really help them.

Who you going to love and take care of today? Yourself? Or your friend or neighbor or brother or sister? Both? Bingo! Go for it!

Adult Sermon:

The mass shooting that happened last Sunday morning has been very difficult for all of us to get our heads around. It is so difficult to understand the motivations of the shooter. He was an American born citizen; and he was a Muslim. He had consistent behavioral problems growing up and in school. He may have had confusion over his sexual identity. He had visited the Gay night club several times. And his ex-wife says he had bi-polar disorder. Was this about homophobia? Or mental illness? Or Islamic radicalization by ICIS? Or all of the above?

How do we respond to a tragic and scary situation like this? Do we do everything we can to distance and separate ourselves from anyone who might have similar troubles and challenges? Avoid Muslims or other immigrants? Avoid those with mental health issues? Avoid those whose sexual orientation may be different from our own?

Or do we look for ways to reach out and connect and try to love and support them. Do we respond out of fear? Or out of love?

Last Sunday afternoon, as I was helping set up Brown Hall to host our Muslim friends from the Turkish Raindrop House for a Ramadan dinner, with all the news about the shooting swirling in my head, I had a moment of panic. Should I cancel this event? Will some radical Muslim or radical anti-Muslim, who knows what we stand for, burst into our dinner with a gun and create mayhem? But another part of me said “This is the night, more than any other, that we need to love and support our Muslim brothers and sisters, because hate and fear is being poured out on them.”

Fortunately, it was an incredible beautiful, peaceful and reconciling evening. Everyone who I’ve spoken to who attended was deeply touched and moved by the experience, including praying together with Muslim friends for gay and lesbian victims of hate and terrorism.

Ironically, I had already started writing this sermon last Thursday afternoon, when I had some free time during the seminar I attended in Austin. And I had already, based on the assigned Scripture readings, come up with a theme and title for the sermon: “Fear? Or Love?”

Both our Epistle reading from Paul’s letter to the Galatians, and our Gospel reading from the 7th chapter of Luke raise the question: Will we respond to difficult and challenging and scary issues out of fear, or out of love?

From our Gospel reading: “Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes (who had just witnessed this incredible healing of a man possessed by demons) asked Jesus to leave them; [Why?] for they were seized with great fear. So [Jesus] got into the boat and returned (to the other side of Lake Galilee).”

[Luke 7:37] As far as we know they had no further connections with Jesus. The people of the surrounding towns and villages did not see the healing of this crazy man, (who obviously had a wide-spread reputation for doing scary and crazy things), as an incredible outpouring of love that needed to be celebrated and affirmed and supported. They did not see the healer, Jesus, as an example of radical and abundant love, someone they needed to connect with. They saw him with suspicion and fear. Why were they afraid? We don’t really know. Maybe hearing that Jesus had ‘cast out demons’ onto a heard of pigs, scared them and made them fear he might cast out demons onto them. Maybe they were afraid to connect with someone who had reached out to a person they had always avoided, who they believed was dangerous.

“Send him away! We can’t take any chances!”

We have a small minority of dangerous, radicalized Muslims in our world, and even some in our own country. How do we respond? “We can’t take any chances! We must ban all Muslims from coming into our country! We should refuse to let them into our neighborhoods, or our churches or homes!”

As I shared in a children’s sermon a couple of weeks ago, Fear is not always a bad thing – unless we give it free reign to control and dominate our thinking. Sometimes fear can guide and protect us and give us wisdom. But it can also overwhelm us and drain us of courage and love. Life is so much easier when we know exactly what’s happening, or going to happen. And when we face uncertainty or new unexplored territory, fear can make us pause and look closer and pay attention. That’s good. And, if we let it, fear can sometimes take over and prevent us from growing and expanding and experiencing the incredible Abundance of Life.

In our Gospel, a whole community of people who have witnessed a man, who had suffered for many years, possessed by demons, (or we would say, overwhelmed with mental illness), who the authorities had unsuccessfully tried to restrain and bind with chains, suddenly they see him “sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.” But they can’t rejoice at his healing. They can’t embrace him. They can’t celebrate his healing. They can’t connect with the healer.

Why? Because of fear.

Jesus spent most of his ministry reaching out to the poor, the disenfranchised, the rejected ones, the sick – constantly stretching his followers to cross the boundaries they had been taught they must honor to be “righteous,” or to cross boundaries that they had been taught to honor to keep themselves safe. Many of the Jewish religious leaders were deeply offended by Jesus’ teachings and actions, and the teachings and actions of his followers after the resurrection. They weren’t following the traditional Jewish rules. They were reaching out to and associating with women, with people who were unclean, unacceptable, people who were sometimes scary. And at the very beginning of the Church, people like Saul, were trying to round up the Jesus followers, and shut down the Jesus’ movement of radical, inclusive love.

But Saul got zapped; and became Paul. He heard the voice of Jesus and was transformed. Paul became a leader of the radical Jesus movement. He founded churches made up of an incredible diversity of people, Jews, Romans, Gentiles, rich, poor, slaves. Some were even led by women. But many of the more conservative early Jewish Christians openly opposed Paul’s vision of the Church. While Paul was in prison in Rome, they traveled to the faith communities Paul had planted around the Mediterranean Sea, and tried to

force them to impose restrictions from the Jewish traditions like circumcision and male dominance. And Paul fought back. Several of our New Testament Epistles are based on letters Paul wrote to the congregations he founded, pushing back against the efforts of more narrow-minded, fear-driven Christians.

From Paul's perspective, Jesus had changed everything. We are all One in Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. Paul's voice of radical love and inclusion, like the voice of Jesus, freaked out those who were clinging to their "sacred" traditions, and those who were fearful of associating with Gentiles or slaves or even women, especially in leadership positions.

But as radical and progressive and inclusive as Paul seemed to be in his letter to the Galatians, other letters in our New Testament, also attributed to Paul, sound very different. For those who attended Bill Miller's excellent class on Paul and Women, the Good, the Bad & the Ugly, you know what I'm talking about. In the later Epistles, also attributed to Paul, like 1st & 2nd Timothy and Titus, women and slaves are clearly not treated as equal or one, and women are not allowed to even speak in church, much less be a leader.

What happened to Paul? Did he change his mind? Many scholars think these letters were actually written in the early 2nd century, long after Paul had been executed, and that they reflect a significant transition in the early Church to a much more traditional and regressive treatment of women and slaves. It seemed the more traditional leaders of the Church feared that they and the Church, if it were too radical and inclusive, would be oppressed and rejected by the leaders of the Roman culture, which was dominated by the rich, by men, etc.

It worked. Despite Paul's efforts and example, the Church refused to allow women to be leaders or clergy for the next almost 2,000 years. And the Church justified and supported slavery until the 19th Century. And to this day, our Sunday morning worship time is still the most racially segregated and divisive time and place in our culture.

Even the Church in scary situations, is prone to react out of Fear, rather than Love. The changes that Jesus began, in terms of treatment and inclusion of women and others on the fringes, and which Paul sought to bring into the life of the Church, were radical, and to many, scary. Not the way most people were used to interacting. Which way do we go? Radical and stretching and inclusive and risk-taking love? Or play it safe? Stick to the old ways. Don't take chances! Keep women and minorities and gays in line.

Love? Or Fear?

The most important and life-changing, transformative decisions in my life were all scary. Marry a liberal, Irish-Catholic woman, who was stretching me in many ways? Give up my law career, which was going well and which I enjoyed, to become a priest? Accept a call to a crazy, progressive, on the edge Church, called "Reconciliation"? They all were a struggle between Fear and Love.

ICIS and the fringe groups of radical Islamic terrorists are scary. The recent mass shootings in San Bernardino and Orlando are scary. Reaching out and trying to connect with people of other faith traditions, other cultures is challenging and scary. We need to respond in ways that protect us and others. **And**, if we let them, the media and aggressive political groups will prey on our fear, and try to grow and justify our fear to serve their own interests. **Or** we can be brave, and reach out to and connect with Muslim brothers and sisters. Sometimes that will be scary. Are we willing to stretch? What would Jesus do?

God is trying to grow and stretch every one of us, in scary ways. Are we willing to grow and stretch? Are we willing to support and encourage one another as we face various difficult challenges?

We are not yet the Church that Jesus imagined and that Paul tried to birth. Will we continue to exclude or treat some as 2nd class Christians or 2nd class children of God? Or will we be the Church, . . . of Reconciliation? Every time this faith community has reached out to include the excluded, whacky artists, divorcees, recovering alcoholics, doubters, LGBTQ brothers and sisters, etc., etc., it's been scary.

I wonder what's the next crazy way, God will try to stretch and grow us?

May our God of Healing and Reconciliation give us the courage to overcome our fears, and the strength to share God's love.