

Faith Over Fear

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Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
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Text: Matthew 10:24-39

This time of year is a tough time to be a dog. Just about every night this week, right after dark, we hear loud pops ringing out over Allendale. With the Holiday Observers canceling the annual Fourth of July fireworks display this year, other folks in town have begun taking matters into their own hands. And I'm not entirely sure what's legal and what's not, but I do know that the fireworks and firecrackers they've been setting off are terrifying to our dog Baxter. When he hears the explosions, he jumps down from the couch or chair where he's lying, his tail between his legs. Sometimes he'll throw a despairing glance over his shoulder at us, as he pads off to one of our bedrooms, looking to burrow beneath a bed. My guess is his brain hears these loud, distant noises as thunder, and millions of years of adaptation are screaming at him to take cover from the coming storm. For some, it's a fun, joyous way to celebrate a summer night. But for our dog, it's an occasion for fear.

You know what fear feels like. You feel it in your body, don't you? Your chest tightens. Your breath comes faster. Your muscles tense. Your heart races, and you begin to feel your pulse. Your body dumps hormones into your bloodstream—epinephrine, norepinephrine, and cortisol—and these chemicals call forth a physical response: fight or flight.

Fear is useful. Our dog's ancestors survived to pass their genes on to him precisely because they weren't dancing around outside in the middle of thunderstorms. Our ancestors passed their genes on to us because their bodies were conditioned to fight off or flee mortal threats. Do you recoil at the sight of a snake? Jump when you see a spider? Feel queasy and panicked when you're in a tight, enclosed space? Nowadays we label these things phobias, and we pathologize them, but these fears come from our survival instincts, and they're the reason why we're here, alive today. The Bible reminds us that God stitched together every part of our bodies, that we are wonderfully made, and so fear too is God's gift, helping to preserve life in a dangerous environment.

Still, fear is a good servant, but a bad master. The stress hormones that are so useful in the short term, giving us strength and energy to survive, take a toll on the immune system, leaving us vulnerable to diseases. They inhibit the creativity and learning processes we need in order to be able to adapt to change and to grow in wisdom. We are made with a capacity for fear, but we are also made in the image of God, who is creative, generous, and compassionate. A prolonged state of fear prevents us from flourishing emotionally and spiritually, and it hides the image of God we carry.

In today's passage, Jesus talks about fear as it relates to our mission as his disciples. You might remember from last week that Jesus is sending out the disciples to teach and heal in his name. Jesus sees God's people with their hurts and their needs as sheep lacking a shepherd, and also as a rich harvest calling out for workers to gather it in. Jesus responds to these needs with compassion and hope and urgency, sending out his disciples to speak and embody God's kingdom—the world as it was made to be. He

calls them apostles, a word that means “those who are sent,” and today we are their modern day heirs. Jesus means to send us out to heal wounds and speak a word of hope and point the way to the world God is building in our midst. And last week I talked about how the lingering wounds of racism in our nation were among the hurts that we are called to heal, and that being an apostle in our time and place means making a commitment to be an anti-racist.

Today Jesus talks about fear. And I’m glad he addresses this, because I struggle with fear a lot, when I think about the work Jesus calls us to do. Maybe you do too. Jesus acknowledges our fears, and the very real dangers that cause us to be afraid. But he also equips us to be guided and strengthened by faith, so that we can be his courageous disciples. A courageous disciple is not someone who feels *no* fear. A courageous disciple is someone in whom God’s image shines forth *in spite* of their fear.

You see this in the way Jesus talks about what is probably the most central image of our faith, the cross. For us the cross is a symbol of comfort. But that wasn’t true for Jesus and his disciples. The cross was a symbol of the violent power of the Roman state. The cross symbolized Rome’s power to snuff out the lives of all who opposed them. And sometimes these were actual rebels and criminals, and sometimes they were just vulnerable people whose suffering and death could serve as an example to terrify and control others. The cross was something to be afraid of. The cross was something to fight or flee. And so it is supremely strange when Jesus talks to his disciples about the cross in the way he does in our passage. If you’re worthy of the name of Jesus, if you’re at all deserving of being called a disciple, Jesus says, then the cross isn’t something you’ll resist or flee. It’s something you’ll heft up onto your own shoulder, as you follow Jesus, the cross-bearing Messiah. Jesus is voluntarily identifying with those whose lives and spirits are brutally repressed by the empire, taking on their suffering and disgrace. And he asks the same of us.

A couple of weeks ago I sat down and watched the film *Just Mercy*. If you haven’t seen it, I encourage you to check it out—last I checked it was still available for free on a number of streaming video services. It’s based on the true story of Bryan Stevenson, an African American lawyer and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, and how he successfully got the murder conviction of Walter McMillian overturned, and freed Mr. McMillian from death row. The case against Mr. McMillian was based entirely on coerced testimony, and the fact that he was black and the murder victim a young white woman seems to have contributed to the state’s rush to convict and execute him. The film’s epilogue relates that for every nine people executed in this country, one innocent person has been exonerated. That’s a shocking rate of error, and it puts capital punishment in the same light as the Roman cross—not an instrument of justice, but of terror and violence against vulnerable communities. What would it mean if we could hear Jesus’ call to take up our cross as a call to identify with the Walter McMillians of the world?

In the course of the film, the attorney Bryan Stevenson himself becomes a target of racist intimidation. On his first visit to the prison where Walter McMillian is held, the guard forces him to undergo a strip search, an indignity that no other lawyer has to endure. The local police stop his car without cause late at night, leaving him shaking. And somebody phones a bomb threat to the home where he is living with the executive director of his organization and her husband and young child. White supremacy and the structures that keep it in place are powerful, and they exact a cost when you challenge them, whether you’re black like Stevenson, or white like the family he was staying with.

Jesus speaks about these costs with his disciples. They called me Beelzebub, a

demon, he says. Just think what they'll do to you! He warns them that there will be conflict even within their own families. Don't think that serving as my apostles and carrying my message is going to be all peace and sunshine, he says. Expect resistance and struggle and hardship.

If Jesus were just sending the apostles out to heal and feed people and say mild and pleasant things about God, he wouldn't need to warn them in the way he does here. Nobody will attack you for doing those things. Something about what the apostles are being sent to do is deeply threatening, so much so that it provokes violent resistance. Because when you seek out and touch and value the people who need healing the most, the people the respectable world has thrown away—the tax collectors, the lepers, the prostitutes—you challenge the power of those who count on having an "outsider," an "other" to look down, and you threaten the wealth of those who exploit them. If we're doing our job as his apostles today, it should be just as threatening, just as unsettling, to the powers that be. Because the Jesus who sent them out to take up their cross sends us out to take up our own, for the sake of the poor, the refugee, the immigrant, the black people brutalized by agents of the state or by others the state protects. And if we answer that call, we can expect to sacrifice for it too.

And yet...

There are limits to the power of these fearsome enemies, Jesus says. They can harm your body, but not your soul, not the deepest and truest part of you where God's image resides. Hold on, be faithful and true to that image, Jesus says, and you will endure. Consider the care God lavishes on the smallest creatures, the sparrows, Jesus says. Doesn't God have vastly more care for you? Doesn't God see and treasure every part of you? Jesus insists that "whoever loses their life for my sake will find it."

So let's talk about our fears. Let's talk about the challenge of hearing Jesus' call to be an apostle, one of God's healing and transformative agents in the world. First, take a deep breath. Hold it. Let it out. Take another breath. Hold it. Let it out. Stay connected with your physical body. Pay attention to the way you start to react to new ideas or information that might be challenging to you. Do you feel a tightness in your chest? Are your muscles tensing up? Unless your roof is falling down on your head or there's a physical attacker getting ready to strike you right now, these responses are not going to be useful to you, but you do have the power to interrupt them. Breathe. Get up and walk. Take a break. Think about something else for a minute, and come back when you've had a chance to reset your body and your mind. Because if you get stuck in this fight-or-flight mode, you are not going to be able to access your creative brain, not going to be able to integrate new information or change or grow. So that's the first thing—breathe, and pay attention to the signals your body is sending you, but also take the time to question them and, if they're not serving you, to take control back for yourself. Your fear is God's gift, but you have the power to master it and make it serve you.

Once you find you're able to do this, I'd encourage you to seek out challenging information about the hurts that are all too present in our world. I mentioned the film *Just Mercy*, and I'd encourage you to watch it. Check out the resources I've put up on the church web page about systemic racism. I don't expect you to agree with everything you see there—just take it in, and keep checking in on your fear response. Beware of anger too—sometimes fear can masquerade as anger, but don't be fooled. Check your body. Ask yourself where the threat is, and if it's not in the room with you, take a deep breath and see if you can reset. What I'm hoping is that as we all learn more about systemic racism and our relationship with it, we'll be equipped to be Christ's apostles, healing the hurts that are crying out right now.

"Whoever loses their life for my sake will find it," says Jesus. There is peace and

power in the life he offers us, a life that can endure fear and conflict, a life that begins now and stretches out to all eternity, a life held in the strong and loving hands of a God who numbers even the hairs of our heads. Jesus wants us to be clear-eyed about the dangers and sacrifices ahead, but also about the promise of what awaits us. "Do not be afraid," Jesus says. "You are precious, you are my own beloved. Take up your cross, follow, and live." Amen.