

“The Only Thing To Fear: Fear Itself”
The Rev. Damaris D. Whittaker

Scripture

Matthew 10:28-30

Psalm 69:7-18

June 22, 2014

“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted.”

Is there a more paralyzing emotion than fear? Perhaps not. It is often the single element that holds us back in our lives. It is fear, and not doubt, that is the antithesis to faith.

Much effort has gone into studying fear--its causes and effects. Dr. Albert Bandura is considered among many to be one of the top five most important psychologists in history.

Dr. Bandura has worked with phobias for a very long time. He developed a methodology for curing people of their fears which he called “guided mastery.”

Guided mastery “is a performance-based approach to phobia therapy derived from social cognitive theory and its component self-efficacy theory.” Bandura proposes that our fears develop when we lose our sense of “self-efficacy.”¹

So, through “guided mastery,” he exposes the person to a course of treatment which includes:

“Three sets of techniques, designed in turn to raise the level, proficiency, and independence of people's performance. The therapist raises the level of self-efficacy and performance by intervening to help people do what they otherwise could not.” [1]

For instance, if a person is afraid of dogs, the first step might be saying to the person, “there is a dog in the other room and we are going to go in there.”

Next step might be looking at a dog through a glass. The next steps would then include activities to progressively lead the person to touch the dog and ultimately defeat their fear.

In the gospel lesson this morning, Jesus is speaking to his disciples, and he is commissioning them to go out on their own mission. However, *the pep talk before the sending*: “Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul.”

¹ Williams, S.L. & Zane, G. (1997). Guided mastery treatment of phobias. *The Clinical Psychologist*, 50, 13-15.

Now, realistically speaking, this is hardly a pep talk. Mentioning “those that can kill the body” bring up a series of red flags and alarm bells in our systems, and certainly, that kind of language brings up our self-preservation instincts.

But, Jesus was someone who had suffered rejection, judgment, slander, threats, and would ultimately face death. So, here he advises his disciples that they, too, will suffer.

He is realistic in saying “do not fear” because the task that they had ahead was dangerous and intimidating. They were trail blazers with a message that was countercultural.

Why does Jesus name the possible dangers that would be faced by his disciples? Perhaps because naming aloud the sufferings might be the first step to disarming the fear.

Now, for us, this concept of possibly losing our lives because of our faith and mission in the world is foreign. We have not experienced such threat.

But so many years after this text was written, we are experiencing an existential threat of another kind. That is - would the church live?

Would the church that we know and love be here for much longer? And so, when we ponder that question, I dare to say that fear enters the room when we hear statistics like *the mainline church has declined 25% since the year 2000*. In the next 20 to 40, 83% of the UCC churches will close. What do we think? How do we react? What emotions inhabit our space?

And, beyond the survival of the church, we face many of our own personal and individual fears. Would we have enough money to retire? Are we safe from terrorist attacks? Are we going to stay healthy long enough to enjoy life?

These are just the few of the things we wrestle with.

So, all of the sudden, there might be something in next room we are afraid of facing. We, too, feel the absence of self-efficacy.

Nonetheless, in the midst of all of our fears, I invite us to hold on to the words of Jesus: “Do not fear those who can kill your body, but cannot kill the soul.”

Let us also hold on to the words of Romans 14:7-8: “For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself. For if we live, we live for the Lord; or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.”

As we hold on to those promises, all of the sudden, we find ourselves in that room we dreaded to enter before. And, perhaps now, we are looking at the object of our fear thorough the glass.

Soon we might be able to touch it even if is with gloves, until we gain self-efficacy and are able to hold it in our laps.

As we deal with our lack of self-efficacy, perhaps we want to think about “what were we put on this earth to do?” What is my purpose? And, what if someone would say, “Your purpose is in the other room, and we have to go in there.”

What would we say? Would we answer, “I’m afraid I don’t have time for my purpose”? I’m sorry, but if I follow my purpose, I will lose my job?

What is the same question would be asked of us as a church? I say the church will live as long as it continues to go into the room that holds its fears, facing them day after day after day.

Pope Francis said, “I prefer a church, hurting and dirty because it’s been out in the world, to one unhealthy from clinging to its own security.”

Dr. Bandura’s findings showed that those who overcame their fears then gained self-efficacy, and consequently, they were able to succeed in other areas of their lives. They saw themselves differently and were able to accomplish things they did not think possible before.

What would it look like for us to be a church that develops self-efficacy?

Marianne Williamson wrote,

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that we fear the most.

We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?

Actually who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing it small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure about you.

We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It’s not just in some of us; it is in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”²

May the God of courage help us reach a place of purposeful confidence. AMEN.

² Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of a Course in Miracles*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1992) pg.190-191.