

6/21 sermon

Grace and peace to you. I'd like you to think for a moment of something that is a fear that you have. It doesn't have to be anything big; it can be something small. I'm thinking something commonplace. So, for instance, to stimulate your thinking I'll start by talking about my own fear. I have a fear, it's a strange fear for someone who is 6'7" tall,

I have a fear of heights. I don't know if you have this experience. But if I'm at the edge of a very tall building or the edge of a canyon or the edge of anything, it doesn't even need to be a very tall building. I can be up about 10 feet on a ladder if I look down.

I can feel it.

My entire body resonates with fright

Fear of heights

For me, this is literally I am immobilized I freeze.

So, I proceeded with all kinds of caution. When I am around edgesm ledgesm tall spaces even ladders.

From some reading on fear by all kinds of anthropologists and psychologists. What we learn is that it's a series of events that go on in our mind that connect us. So, for instance what happens to me when I'm afraid of heights is, I see the heights and then I go through my mind very quickly. I anticipate a number of events that conclude with me at the bottom of the canyon floor or on the sidewalk.

talk death

But it's not just a quick leap from the fear to death that it is the fear of slipping the fear of falling the fear of actual tumbling through the air. It is all of these connections and then I connect them back.

Two earlier experiences of accidents of other times when I've fallen.

And even deaths that I've encountered.

Today's Gospel lesson is a strange one. I'll admit it's as if Matthew was putting together his gospel and he had all of these sayings of Jesus' teachings and it was before an appendix was invented where they could have just put all this stuff. So, he decided Well, let's just put it here in chapter 10m people will figure it out and we've been spending two thousand years checking our head figuring it out.

I'm not going to cover everything because there is a lot here where one sentence could be a whole sermon.

But let's start with highlighting the beginning. Did you catch all of the fear, not all of the references to not being afraid? This is actually consistent with a lot of biblical literature where the Bible again and again and again has hundreds and hundreds of times in which there is an admonition to be Not Afraid or fear not, it can be from Angelic beings, to other human beings to the voice of God in the Psalms to In this case today the voice of Jesus saying fear not - It's comforting and yet. I don't know about you, but I still experience fear.

Fear arises in our very being from our understanding of well from an evolutionary point of view. It's actually a gift to have fear has protected us and that can be from whether we're at the edge of a building maybe as a young child peering over so that there is fear so that we pull back.

Or the fear that we might be stalked by a saber-toothed tiger. This role of fear has kept us safe. So, fear does play an important role in the life of a human being?

One of the fears that I think is particularly of fascination in our world today is our experience of other people.

Let's talk about this in a couple of different ways.

Let's start with Jared Diamond, who's an anthropologist. He's written a number of books, but one in particular fairly recent one that I read called the world until yesterday in it. He spends most of the book describing life from his research as an anthropologist in New Guinea where he understands or seeks to understand cultures and their priorities.

People afraid of those people just over the hill because they've never been there.

And while the book is long and detailed and research the most fascinating part of the book for me is the introduction in which Mr. Diamond describes being at an international airport on his way back from New Guinea having just spent time in those hills and mountains with indigenous people and he realizes something that is peculiar about our modern society that has never existed in the history of humanity.

There he sat in an airport, you remember those that was back in January, when we did things like fly around the world or to just other cities in our own country. But at that time in those days people would sit in airports drinking a cup of coffee watching as complete strangers walked by, complete strangers seat next to them in the airport. People are engaging in the acquisition of goods food or maybe some water bottle.

In other words, it's a very civil exchange of complete strangers and not just complete strangers but complete strangers many of which look very different from you, whoever you are sitting in that airport. This is unheard of in the history of humanity because as Mr. Diamond discovered in his research in New Guinea and is true throughout all other indigenous cultures is in fact, there was a very much of a closed attitude and the reason you had a village and the reason it took a village is it was a mode of protection because you were afraid of those other people across the hill. And here he sits in a modern airport in Hawaii on his way back witnessing all kinds of strangers interacting. We have developed a level of trust with one another where we could be in those public spaces with complete strangers and not experience fear.

And then the coronavirus hit. And it is changed everything now we go to the grocery store, and I don't know about you, but I have a wonder about that person next to me in the vegetable section. Is he carrying the virus unwittingly or she who's over there looking at a lot of those melons and handling them and I was going to purchase one. She's handling them with her bare hands if I go over and choose one of those will I be safe in other words all of a sudden in the public sphere fear has entered our lives. Fear has always been a part of our lives, but somehow we put it at bay at least in those public surroundings. But now another kind of fear has raised itself from underneath the surface to very overt.

It's the fear of other people, the fear of people who look different, act different, but mostly appear different. Now before we go there in detail, I'd like to you to just imagine if I walk into a room as who I am in a suit and a tie. What's your perception? If I walk into that same room in shorts, sandals, a T-shirt and a baseball cap with sunglasses, what's your impression? If I walk into a room in a clerical collar with a cross, what's your impression?

This is important because it goes at our instinct. Well, we just have biases, we have assumptions about people, even their dress, but then when we add other aspects of bias, we make assumptions. Clearly in our world today, one of the things that we are wrestling with is on the issue of race.

I want to tell two stories to maybe help many of the folks who are watching this, to try to get their own minds around this idea.

The first story comes from the speech that then-presidential candidate Barack Obama gave in the spring of 2008 when he was talking about race and in the middle of that speech one of the rather vulnerable and confessional aspects of it that he made was he talked about his grandmother saying to him while he was a young boy – now remember his grandmother was white, both his grandparents were white, and he was raised by them for some time in the Midwest – I think Kansas – and at that time she says to him, she confesses her just instinctual fear of walking down the street and when she sees another black person, she's afraid she either says that she crosses the other side of the street or wants to cross inside the street. I think Barack Obama was telling that story because he wanted to communicate that he understood the perspective of a white person in America. I think he also wanted to tell that story so that white people would understand what it's like to be a black person in this society.

Which leads me to the second story which appeared in a newspaper. I think it was the Washington Post. It was a section, an article on many of the dynamics that people are experiencing today. The example was of an African American man who lives in a suburb outside of Washington, DC. And he said to the writer of the column, “Well, I'm very intentional about my public presence, when I go for a walk in my neighborhood. I bring a little tiny toy dog his own toy poodle or something and a child, his child, preschool kindergarten age we go for a walk because when I in my neighborhood with that little tiny cute little dog and that young child, I'm safe or I'm safer, Because if I were to walk alone as a black man in my neighborhood, I might be in jeopardy so that little tiny dog and that young child protect me.

I tell these two stories to try to get at race in America, and fear.

There are powers, principalities and powers, forces in our culture that intend to divide us separate us and make us think that we are not all God's children.

In the second part of the Gospel lesson today, towards the very end, you have that explain a bit more extensive quotation of Jesus about I have not come to bring peace, but I've come to bring a sword, dividing family one from one another. A lot of people have used this passage, or in my view misused it, to justify their own particular position on a variety of issues. In other words, they take the position and then they say well see Jesus said, you know come to divide people. So therefore, choose my side. I'm not exactly sure that that was the intent of those sayings one of the risks of being a teacher who gets quoted is your often misquoted.

I wonder if we look a little bit deeper at a soul level of this particular passage and just note that a sword the image of a sword the metaphor of a sword is often a sword is often used to cut or divide. When one makes an incision you are cutting. When one makes a decision, you are cutting.

In my experience when people make a choice, make a decision, they say look, I've looked at a lot of the issues. I've read about it. I've studied it. I've examined it. I've wrestled with it. I've prayed with it, I've reflected on it. And this is a difficult decision to make but here's my decision and then they put it out there. What inevitably happens is that people take sides. They choose to agree or disagree.

There is contention which is why any leader that has ever been in any position of authority that is ever made any kind of decision knows those two quotes of well, you just can't win, or no good deed goes unpunished.

Jesus and biblical literature as a whole make some pretty clear decisions and one of those decisions that it makes and articulates throughout the Bible from the beginning to the end is that humanity is humanity and racism and forms - either structural or interpersonal - that are designed to separate or devalue groups of people are not consistent with our understanding of the Christian faith, and they're not consistent with Biblical literature.

The Bible contains strong and clear teachings about the sin of racism and of the idolatry of heritage and nationality. For instance in the book of Acts in the midst of an advantage lecture to the citizens and philosophers in Athens, Paul makes the case that God created all the races from one human being. Paul's Greek listeners saw other races as barbarian but against such a views of racial superiority Paul makes the case that all races have the same creator.

Since all are made in the image of God, every human life is infinite and has equal value. It's talked about in Genesis and later on when Jonah puts the national interest of Israel ahead of the spiritual well-being of the racially-other pagan city of Nineveh, Jonah is roundly condemned by God.

One main effect of the Gospel is to shatter the racial barriers that separate people Paul writes about this again and again in Galatians and Ephesians. So it is an egregious sin to do anything to support those barriers when Peter sought to do so Paul reprimanded him in Galatians for losing his grasp on the gospel.

And Jesus by his interactions with people like Samaritans, women, and others who were considered other and less than in his culture by his own actions he communicates that humanity is all God's people, And we are not two separate nor are we to value ourselves above one another simply on the basis of our skin color, which is where we get the phrase white supremacy. It's the idea of being supreme. That is completely rejected in the Gospels.

I think that most everybody that's listening today agrees what I've just outlined. So, the question is what do we do about it?

I am particularly helped in these cases by Bryan Stevenson who wrote the book Just Mercy. It was turned into a movie recently. In an article - in 2017 I think it was - he outlined steps for us to take so let's just walk through those quickly, **number one**: We have to get close to the problems we care about. We have to get close to the problems we care about. That means we need to be in relationship. We need to be connected. And ideally if we could, but we can't in this coronavirus time, we need to be in the same room breaking bread with people who are other than us.

Now I know our tendency especially as middle-class Lutherans - we tend to be overly intellectual and so we want to start a book club. That's fine. There's nothing wrong with that but that has to be a beginning that can't be the ending. We are not going to book club, we're not going to read our way through the problem of racism in this country. So yes, read study, but mostly we got to get close to this problem.

Now for a lot of you you're wondering, how can I do that? Can you find somebody who is different?

Yeah, I'm asking you to be intentional about starting a relationship. If you don't already have one with if you are a white person with an African American man, or woman. If you are a white person, I'm asking you to be in conversation with one of our Latino brothers and sisters. If you are a white person who has really strong views on gender being male or female maybe there's an opportunity for you to start a conversation with somebody who defines themselves in a non-binary way in other words, their identity is more fluid.

I'm asking you - and I'm particularly talking to people in the New England Synod because that's where I serve - can we develop some starting points of people who are different than us, who look different than us so that we can discover they're not different than us? Their life experience of the world is different. But at the core and heart of who we are is God's people we are all God's people.

Now, Mr. Stephenson goes on to cite several other points, but I want to emphasize this first one as a starting point developing a relationship with another human being.

His other points are, **number two**, we have to change the narrative the US culture has a narrative of fear and anger. We have to move towards mutual respect. We have to change that fundamental story line that we live and breathe which is a story line built on fear. Now you and I are not immune to fear as I've already said and you and I it is reinforced every time we turn on the television, listen to a podcast and there is advertising because advertising is based on fear. You are an inadequate person if you do not buy this brand-new Mitsubishi. That is a message, or fear is a tool in that process. We have to change that narrative and move it towards mutual respect. I'm suggesting that in this area of racial differences, we start with the first point we get close to somebody who is not like us.

Number three. He says we have to remain hopeful. Cynicism, be gone! We have to remain hopeful it is who we are as God's people we are people of hope and nowadays. It is tough to be hopeful I recognize that

But sit back.

Find a way reconnect with the story that is the epic story of Genesis through Revelation, of Jesus birth, death - talk about cynicism - and Resurrection. We are a people of Hope.

And, **number four**, sometimes we have to do uncomfortable things. This one's hard.

Perhaps the first suggestion that I've made today is going to make you uncomfortable I get that but I think we are called to do uncomfortable things and we are called to be an uncomfortable people. Being uncomfortable is often an opportunity for growth, It's often an opportunity for living into the fullness of our calling to be disciples of Jesus.

It's uncomfortable. I get it and particularly conversations around race and racism make us uncomfortable. Be that as it may let's Embrace that uncomfortableness and let's do it together because I think if we do it together, we can acknowledge our uncomfortableness.

You only go through that to get to the other side. And the gospel on the other side is always through the cross. It's always through the experience of loss, of death. we go through the cross as Jesus went through the cross. on to Easter, to resurrection. Living the gospel is about trusting God and trusting one another and trust always requires vulnerability. It is the only way forward. When we are vulnerable with one another and with God, there is the promise of God's presence the mission of God becomes alive.

When you think about it, that's really what God did with, for, and through Jesus entering the world as a child. a Palestinian Arab Jewish child, vulnerable, incomplete need of other human beings to care for him, to raise him, to nurture him.

That vulnerability that God entered into in the simple act of incarnating Godself in the form of a human being named Jesus. That's a vulnerable move and God experienced the fullness of what it is to be a human being including the vulnerable position of dying on the cross, betrayed, rejected by the very people whom God trusted. And yet not letting that be the last word, God said this is not the end.

We move forward. I'm going to be vulnerable again and again and again and as God is vulnerable with us, maybe we can seek to be vulnerable, uncomfortable with one another and through that we learned not to fear.
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