

Sermon: "Fear and Courage"

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First Congregational Church UCC of Burlington, Vermont

Daniel 3:13-1

I John 4:18-21

Matthew 6:25-34

I.) Introduction. When Carrie asked me to preach a few weeks ago, she said, "You can preach on whatever is on your mind." So I began to think about that, and it soon became clear to me that the central focus of my thoughts over the last several months has had to do with the amount of fear in our country and how that fear is shaping our communal and political life.

I have been taken aback by the anger and hostility toward immigrants and refugees. Way back when President Obama announced that we would accept 70,000 Syrian refugees, I thought that was quite reasonable and not at all a controversial number. After all, Germany had taken in over a million and even Canada was taking many times more of these poor, suffering people. So when about twenty governors insisted that they would not allow a single one of these refugees into their states, I thought, "What is going on here? Have we no sympathy for homeless, frightened desperate people, no compassion, no empathy no heart?" I thought that surely could not be true. But then it became clear to me that it was essentially fear that was motivating these stands, and that fear that was being promoted for political purposes. I thought, "What kind of people are we to give into these irrational fears?" Are we a bunch of cowards, afraid to do the right thing? We always proclaim that we are "The land of the free and the home of the brave." I told Betty "The next time I sing the national anthem, I'm going to sing "The land of the free and the home of the wimps." Of course I haven't done that, but I did think about it.

Last year on one occasion I was asked to give a little devotional to start a Trustee meeting, and I clearly had these same thoughts on my mind, for I spoke on the subject of "Courage". If the problem is fear, then the virtue we need to live in these times is "Courage". One thing that has stuck with me from a seminary course is that, "All of the virtues depend on courage, for courage is the defender of all of the other virtues." What good is it to feel pity or compassion for people who are in danger, or in trouble if we do not have the courage to help? What good is it to know the truth, if we are afraid to speak it, and to speak it to power if necessary?" What good is it to recognize injustice if we do not have the courage to take a stand against it?

Then Sally May preached a couple of powerful sermons where she identified fear as "the greatest threat that we face today".

Finally, I read an insightful little book by William Willimon entitled "Fear of the Other". In that book, Willimon points out that the web site, "dictionary.com" had chosen xenophobia as the "Word of the Year" for 2016. Xenophobia means the fear of people from another country, religion, or culture; or simply the fear of anyone different from your self. If xenophobia is the "Word of the Year" in our country, then we are in serious trouble. So I was hooked, and felt compelled to deal with this topic.

II.) The Nature of Fear. We can't start to explore the nature or psychology of fear here in any depth, but we can at least say a few important things about it.

1.) First it can be said that fear is "ubiquitous", it is everywhere all the time. Every one of us experiences some degree of fear many times every day, not necessarily extreme debilitating fear like terror, but remember that ordinary things like worry, anxiety and stress all have their roots in fear.

2.) Fear in and of itself is neither good nor bad; it is not a vice or a virtue. It is simply a state of mind or a state of being. I think that fear stands in the same relationship to our mental state, as pain stands to our physical state. Pain is unpleasant, but it is a necessary alarm that something is wrong with our bodies, and we need to respond appropriately to the condition. Fear is also unpleasant, and it is also a helpful alarm that there may be danger, or trouble ahead and we had better decide how to respond to it.

So the challenge is not to simply reject or deny all fear, it is to address our fears rationally and respond appropriately.

3.) Some of our fears are in response to well known and recognized threats. For example if a bee lands on you, you have every reason to experience some fear. Or if the smoke alarm goes off in the night, fear is an appropriate response and deserves to be respected. But many of our fears are rooted in the “fear of the unknown”. If we are inclined to be “afraid of the unknown”, then we will be in a constant, maybe subconscious, state of fear, because we are always facing an unknown future. It is this kind of fear that is the most problematic, and the most likely to be irrational. Fear of the unknown allows our imaginations to run wild, and can lead to all kinds of speculation. In particular, it is this state of fear where conspiracy theories are born.

4.) Fear can lead to bitter consequences. It is human nature to dislike, or even be angry with the thing or things that make us afraid, and anger can easily turn to hatred or even violence. This is a special problem with “xenophobia”, or “the fear of the other”. If you are afraid of “the other” then you are likely not to like them and maybe even hate them or seek to do them harm, even though they have done nothing to deserve such treatment, except to be different than us in some way.

5.) Finally, it should be pointed out that our fears make us vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation, either for political purposes or for financial gain. It seems to be a favorite marketing approach to frighten us into thinking that we must have a certain product to protect us from some particular fear, real or imagined. In politics if a candidate has certain fears which call for certain policies, then if he or she can convince us to have the same fears, then we will support the same policies.

So much for fear, but what can we say about courage as a response to fear?

III.) Courage as a response to fear. The ancients included courage, along with prudence, temperance and justice, as the four “Cardinal Virtues.” They argued that the virtuous person does not only think good thoughts, and have good intentions and instincts, a person is only called “good” if they actually “do good things” for others. For Christians, when Jesus instructed us to love our neighbor as ourselves, he used the verb “agape” which has little to do with feelings, but is best translated “to serve”. Thus it is a demand that we “Serve our neighbor even as we serve ourselves. Or take care of our neighbor, even as we would take care of ourselves. Provide for our neighbor even as we provide for ourselves.” And when Jesus called his disciples to “Take up your cross and follow me,” it certainly implied much more than feelings. It was a call to action that could well be dangerous and lead to suffering and persecution. It is courage that empowers us to put our good intentions into that kind of action.

Consider the story of the Good Samaritan. Remember that the priest and the Levite noticed the wounded man but passed by on the other side of the road. There is no explanation why they did not stop to help. Maybe they were too busy and on tight schedules. But maybe they were just a little afraid that it might not be safe. Maybe the band of robbers was still around, and maybe he would become their next victim: best to keep going.

I have thought that the Samaritan was not just kind and compassionate, but he was also brave. He took the chance. He put his own life at risk, in order to save another life. It would have been quite a different story, if he had been a coward and too afraid to stop and help.

But an even more powerful story of courage is the Passion Story of Jesus. Remember that he and his disciples were perfectly safe in the far north village of Caesarea Philippi where Jesus made his first prediction of his Passion. He said that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the chief priest and scribes and be killed, and on the third day be raised up.

But he resolutely set his face to Jerusalem. He knew very well the nature of the suffering that awaited him. He repeated the prophecy of the Passion three times as they marched south, so it must have been foremost on his mind. Still he never wavered, he marched on to suffer and die. Then in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed that he wouldn't have to go through with it. In his anguish he sweated blood. Still Jesus was not dragged kicking and screaming to the cross. But he had the courage to stay the course and endure the suffering.

So we should not be surprised to learn that the Bible has a great deal to say to us about both fear and about courage.

IV.) Fear and Courage in the Bible. What does the Bible have to say about fear and courage?

1.) The first thing I would say is that the Bible takes human fear very, very seriously. The word "fear" appears in scripture over 300 times; the word "afraid" over 200 times; variations of these words over 200 times. I think we can safely say that the subject of fear is addressed at least 1,000 times in the Biblical story.

2.) Many times Jesus admonished his disciples with the phrases "fear not" or "be not afraid". Angelic messengers did the same on countless occasions; to both Mary and Joseph, to Zechariah and Elizabeth, to the shepherds in the fields at the birth of Jesus and to the women at the tomb at his resurrection. These admonitions acknowledge the reality of human fear, but also call us not to give in to our fears, but to be brave, have courage to overcome our fears.

3.) The Bible offers us two strong sources of courage. The first of these is "love". Our scripture reading from I John, insists that there is no fear in love, and perfect love drives out fear. The Good Samaritan is an example of love overcoming fear. Our story does not say that the priest and Levite did not love the injured man, but it does say that the Samaritan had pity on him, which is a form of love. It was pity, or love that gave the Samaritan the courage to overcome his fears and come to the aid of the wounded man.

The second source of courage is "faith". Faith and trust in God and God's providential care, gives us courage to live boldly in this world and not be afraid. In our Gospel reading Jesus insists that we should not be anxious or worried about the future. God provides for the birds of the air and the flowers of the fields, surely he will provide for us as well.

I think the story of the three Hebrew Children in the fiery furnace is one of the most powerful statements in the whole Bible of courage that comes from faith. Their response to the King was that they trust that their God has the power to deliver them from the fiery furnace, and they believed that he will, but "if He chooses not to, He is still our God and we will not bow down to the king or his golden statue". Wow! What an amazing testimony to the courage that comes from deep and unshakable faith in God.

V.) Conclusion. In concluding let me say that since Sally May's sermons, I have paid closer attention than ever to how fear is promoted for political advantage, and how widely fear permeates our society. I not only think she was right, but that the situation has gotten even worse and the need for courage even greater.

But remember that you and I are under orders to be brave, and not to be afraid. Jesus also said, "I came that they might have life and have it abundantly." An abundant life is not one burdened with fear, worry and anxiety. It is a life lived boldly, courageously, willing to risk and take a chance. In telling us not to be anxious about tomorrow, Jesus took away our fear of the unknown future.

Jesus taught us to love our neighbor and even our enemy, which essentially embraces all of God's people. If we love all people then we will "love the other". But since there is no fear in love, we certainly will not be afraid of them, rather we will "love the other". We will not be repulsed by them and move away from them. Rather we will be drawn to them and embrace them. We will not see them as a threat, but as a blessing.

By his life of love and faith, Jesus showed us how to live courageously and abundantly. By his death and resurrection, he conquered our fear of death, and taught us how to die.

If, as Sally May said, "Fear is the greatest threat we face today", then Jesus has surely prepared us to cope with it, and in so doing, he sets us free to live fully and abundantly, even in times such as these.

LET US PRAY.