

Fear Not 1: Casting Out Fear

1 John 4: 18-21

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One of the Bible's central themes is, "do not be afraid," so Abby and I thought we would take a few weeks in the middle of winter, in the season of Epiphany, the season of light, to listen to what the Bible says to our fears.

Today's scripture from the first letter of John provides the foundation for this series, and the antidote for fear which is love. In the remaining weeks of this series, these verses will be in the background.

This passage comes from a community that felt like the world hated them. The author writes that in chapter 3, "do not be astonished that the world hates you." They were persecuted for following Jesus. They were having trouble relating with people outside the community and they are having conflict internally too, not a surprise for a community under stress. This community is afraid, they are threatened. Fear is always about feeling threatened.

The writer responds in chapter four by talking about love. First the writer says in verse 16, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them," Then the writer says, "there is no fear in love, but perfect love, (this love of God) casts out fear." Staying rooted in the love of God will cast out fear for this community under threat.

This passage gets at what Christian faith will do for us: Practicing Christian faith, living in this story: that God is love, that what is ultimate is love, that this love is with us and for us, no matter what we have done, no matter what people say, this will go to work on our fears. Faith practice will start transforming and healing our lives from the inside.

As a child, I watched cartoons on Saturdays. One of my favorites was He-Man. I admit it. I am not ashamed. I liked stepping inside the mythology of this cartoon. The muscle bound hero held great appeal for a boy who looked like a stick figure, who was never the strongest. But there was something else that was appealing. There was a transformation that happened in every episode.

The main character Adam, had a sidekick, a cat named Cringer. Cringer as the name suggests, was afraid of everything. When it was time to fight the powers of evil, Adam would call on the power of Grayskull, the godlike power in this mythology, and a lightning bolt would flow through him transforming him and then flowing through him to Cringer, transforming this fearful quivering mass into a fearless hero.

Growing up, I felt like Cringer a lot, at school, with my peers, when my family turned into the Von Trapp family singers and we sang for church as special music. I wanted something that could cast out fear like that lightning bolt, so I could be fearless too. I would grab my action figures and I would play in that story, I would live in it.

We live in a world of competing mythologies, competing stories that offer to address our deepest needs and meet our deepest fears. We are told that when we have more money, then we will feel secure. We are told that when we have more guns, then we will finally feel safe. Christianity tells us that what we need is trust that we are unconditionally loved. Rooting ourselves in our story of God's unconditional love will cast out fear, maybe not like a lightning bolt, but our ancestors point to the promise of love.

To assure you that My tastes have broadened beyond the mythology of He-Man, I'll share that this week I watched a video of Brene Brown a therapist and research professor at the University of Houston who studies and teaches about shame, belonging and trust.

I love the moments when I hear our ancestors of faith and current experts in their fields touching on the same things even though they are separated by a few thousand years.

Brown says that "shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging." Shame leaves us feeling unlovable. She says that shame is a universal experience. We all have it. Every one of us. Our feelings of shame are a fundamental threat to our humanness because we are wired for connection and belonging as human beings. The fear that we might not be worthy, or worth being part of the group is a primal fear. She calls shame, this primal fear, the master emotion. It can take over everything. She says that our bodies respond to shame, this fear we that aren't worth being part of the group, aren't lovable, as our bodies respond to trauma, physical injury, a threat to our lives. This is fascinating. She talks to about the three different ways that we all respond to shame, and I'll share a little more about that next week.

What Brown is saying is that this primal fear that we all have, a fear that can drive everything, is the fear that we are flawed, that we don't have worth, that we aren't acceptable, lovable, that we really should be cut off from the group. And to that, I hear the writer of 1 John saying (sung) "All we need is love...dah, dah da da dah..." Our grand story is responding to this primal fear. God is love and God is with us and for us. We are loved unconditionally. Accept this grace. Trust it. What do you have to lose. Live in this story. Accept that you are accepted and let that cast out your fear.

And then this love that is for us, quickly turns us towards our neighbors.

In our little passage for today, the statement about perfect love casting out fear turns quickly to loving brother and sister and offering them grace too. It says that when we fail to love our sister and brother, we are off the path. If we don't offer the grace we have received to others, then we are losing our way. Because we need one another, we need relationship. That's where this holy, ultimate mystery is found. That's where this primal need for love and belonging is met, in empathy, in connection, and fear melts away.

I want to close with a story I heard at an Isaiah MN meeting of clergy. It's a story about what happened at the Dar Al-Farooq Islamic Center in Bloomington after the bombing that happened there on August 5th.

Immediately after the bombing, two leaders of the mosque were debating what to do. One said they should call the police and the other said no. The fear was that if they went public about this they would be in even more danger. They ended up calling the police and the first advice of the police was to be quiet about the event too, that more attention would make them more of a target. They debated but ended up calling the press, and as a result there ended up being a big rally of support pulled together by neighbors, other religious communities, and religious leaders.

Through this, the leaders of the mosque started working with ISAI AH MN, the coalition of religious communities of which we are a part. One of the leaders of the mosque went to weeklong training this fall, a training that I have gone to and others at First UCC have gone to, a transformational week. And this leader shared that he was at the mosque when the bomb went off. He could have died. Then he said something to the effect of, "I thought that if we were just

as small as possible then we would be safe. If we tried to be invisible, then no one would bother us. (This is one of our natural responses to shame, pulling in on ourselves, hiding who we are). But I was wrong. And I found that when went public about who we are and what has happened to us and what we need, that is when we found our friends.” He said that they knew now they needed to be as public as possible about what they needed as a community. They know there will be resistance but they are confident that this is what they need to do. The Dar Al-Farooq Islamic Center in Bloomington has joined the effort that we are a part of at First UCC, of taking a statewide faith agenda for racial and economic equity and climate justice to local caucus meetings February 6th.

In this story I hear love transforming a threat to people’s lives and people’s worth. Through a community of people loving their neighbor, I see love transforming fear into courage, courage that will serve other neighbors. Love is having a multiplying effect.

Perfect love casts out fear. This is a story we practice and live in because it meets our deepest needs. Thanks be to God. Amen.