

Fearing Inadequacy  
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Luke 22: 24-27  
January 14, 2018

We are in the midst of a series in which we are listening to what the Bible says to our fears. Last week, our focus was on a verse from the 4th chapter of 1 John that will be in the background this whole series: “God is love,” and “perfect love casts out fear.” Living in the Christian story will go to work on our fears: God is love, this love is with us and for us, no matter what has happened, no matter what people say, we are loved unconditionally.” Practicing this story will change us.

This week, we drop in on one scene of the Last Supper in the gospel of Luke. Jesus has just told the disciples that one of them will betray him. The disciples can't believe that any of them could possibly be capable of such a horrible act. They are disturbed, stressed, desperate to separate themselves from this sin. In their desperation to prove themselves, the conversation takes a revealing and predictable turn.

The disciples start arguing about which one of them is the greatest. If this betrayal is the worst that a human being could do, then the way you get as far as possible from the worst that humans can do is to be the best. That's the safest place for your sense of worth. Maybe then Jesus will approve of you.

I love the disciples. They try to do everything right, and they still mess it all up. All they want is for Jesus to love them. They want this person whom they love and think is great to love them and think they are great too. And they are afraid, that Jesus won't love them for who they are. They are afraid that Jesus has a grading scale. Judas is clearly gets an F, and they don't want to be a D or a C they want to be best in class. Maybe then they will be good enough to be loved. The disciples are afraid they are inadequate, and they are jostling for position.

Last week I shared some information from a video I watched of Brene Brown, a therapist and research professor at the University of Houston who teaches about shame, belonging, and trust.

Brown says that “shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.” She says that shame is a universal experience. We all have it. 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. It is the master emotion, it can drive everything. The disciples are wrestling with their shame, their fear that they aren't lovable, especially because of betrayal, because of something one of them has done.

What is also interesting is that Brown says we respond to shame( to our fear that we might not be worth loving) in three ways. She calls them “shame shields.” We either move away (we hide, we try to be invisible. This is my favorite, this is what I do naturally) or we move forward (, which means people please, inauthentically flatter, my second favorite response) or move against (we fight shame with shame, we lash out, making others feel small with our words - think Donald Trump).

The disciples fighting about greatness are moving against one another. Trying to cut others down to make themselves look greater. But I'm guessing that there are other disciples responding to their shame, their fear in the other two ways: some thinking about how they might curry favor with Jesus, and others are there with their eyes down not saying, content to let others make a fool of themselves while hoping that Jesus won't look at them.

Brene Brown says that her favorite shame shield is the third one, moving against, fighting shame with shame, making others feel small. She has a couple mantras she says to herself when she is feeling shame, feeling inadequate, not worthy. One is “don't talk, text, or type.” The other thing she says to herself is, “don't puff up, don't shrink, just stand your sacred ground.” Isn't that good?

“Don't puff up - don't project a grandiose version of yourself. Don't shrink, “don't hide, don't be less than who you are. “Just stand your sacred ground.” The word, “sacred” in this sentence, suggests to me that there is something holy about trusting that in and through all things that we are always lovable, that we always have worth. In the Christian story that we practice and live: unconditional love is the sacred ground on which we always stand.

Think about those moments where you feel inadequate, places where you question yourself, recreate them for a second: moments at work, entering a new work environment, interacting with coworkers, within your family, within social circles, new and existing. What happens when we say to ourselves, “don’t puff up, don’t shrink, just stand your sacred ground?” Part of the purpose of the church is to remind us of the sacred ground on which we stand, unconditional love that allows us to be who we truly are. How might our behavior change in those moments when we are afraid and questioning ourselves? How might the disciples have behaved differently if Peter instead of attacking James and John to say they were less than him, was saying to himself, “Peter, you are starting to feel afraid, you’re getting hooked, don’t puff up, don’t shrink, just stand your sacred ground?”

Jesus responds to all of this by responding to those who are puffed up. Jesus responds to the disciples projecting a grandiose version of themselves out of fear. Jesus reminds them and us that he is creating a different world where greatness is understood differently. Greatness isn’t about having status. Greatness isn’t about being seen as being better than others. What is great is turning towards the neighbor and their needs.

There’s a little danger here for those of us who, when questioning our worth, respond by shrinking, or by people pleasing. When those are natural ways that we respond to fear, serving is an easy response, sometimes an unhealthy one. But when Jesus calls us to love the neighbor, we are called to love ourselves at the same time. When Jesus calls us to turn toward the neighbor, we are not asked to shrink to do so, but to turn towards the neighbor while being our full selves, with all the God-given gifts we can bring.

This week I watched the movie *Batman Begins* with Christian Bale on Netflix, another messianic story. I’ve seen it before, but I didn’t remember that fear is a central theme. For those unfamiliar with the Batman stories, Bruce Wayne is the person who is Batman and this movie tells the story of how he becomes the Caped Crusader.

As a boy, Bruce Wayne falls into a dry well on the grounds of Wayne manor and hurts himself. As he’s waiting for help, he startles a large number of bats that swirl around him as

they are trying to fly out of the well. Obviously, it's terrifying. Shortly after this incident, he is at an opera performance with his parents, and some swirling figures on ropes on the stage remind him of the bats and he asks his parents to leave. They do. As they leave, his parents are mugged and then murdered in the process.

The boy feels responsible for the death of the people he loves the most. He lives his life essentially afraid of what his fear might cause him to do, afraid of who he is, his past, what has happened. He wants to get as far away from this part of himself as he can, and he is throwing his life away.

He has a sort of conversion moment where he doesn't want his greatness anymore, his wealth, his name, he just wants to root out injustice and protect other people from going through what he has gone through. He ends up training with this guru who becomes a father figure for him, and this guru is constantly badgering him about his fear.

Eventually Bruce returns to Gotham City determined to combine compassion with justice to serve the people of the city.

However, he still doesn't know how he will respond when he is face to face with his fear. There's a moment (if I could show you this scene, I would) where he discovers a large cave on the ground of Wayne manor. He again startles a large number of bats. He immediately curls up on the ground, but then slowly he stands, and he remains standing there with hundreds of bats flying all around him. Trombones are playing majestically through a series of satisfying chords. Doing just what trombones were created to do. It's moving.

I've been thinking about this scene from this movie as an image of what Christian transformation can look like. Increasingly trusting and remembering God's unconditional love, staying centered in, standing in this love even while our fears swirl all around us. Fear has less and less pull on our lives and we turn towards our neighbor with more and more of who we truly are.

That also sounds great. May it be so. Amen.