From Fear to Hope


As you know, I worked from Folly Beach, SC, much of the last two weeks. One day, I rode my bike to the commercial center of the island with my friend. As we looked at the houses, some new, some much older, he told me the story of his in-laws and Hurricane Hugo that landed, epicenter just north of the island over Sullivan’s Island. They weathered the storm in town, but when it was over, headed to see the damage. There was so much debris, it wasn’t possible to drive to their house, so they parked and walked, dodging trees and houses, house parts and storm surge. At one point, Julie’s dad, Steve, started running and ran as much as he could to the house. He feared what he would find. They were among the lucky ones—they lost half of their roof and had a lot of water damage. To this day, my friend Julie’s mom has banned anyone from saying the “H” word in the house—that is both hurricane and Hugo.

Fear. It is a powerful emotion. Stan Saunders, New Testament Professor at Columbia seminary asked the question, “Is there any more pervasive or powerful motivating force in human experience?” He notes from the moment we are born, we learn to fear the world around us—to fear the stranger, to fear the unknown, sometimes to even fear those closest to us.

What do you fear?

In our lives of relative comfort and privilege, for some of us who have been sheltered, we have not had to wrestle with the demon of fear too frequently. In the places I have found myself, fear is an emotion that has been privatized. Our soldiers coming back from war have been taught not to talk about fear and the PTSD that keeps them up at night and makes them skittish at the smallest of sounds. Our friends and neighbors, even those among us, have squashed down stories of being afraid of family members who use violence or volatile and abusive words to deal with their own fears of inadequacy and lack of power, continuing fearful cycles of abuse. Some of us have dreams about the things we fear. After having a tornado touch down near our home when I was five, I dreamed for years in black and
white about a tornado chasing me down our street, me running as fast as I could. Or my other dream, even more petrifying, of me navigating the tunnels and windy paths of a ghetto, running away from Nazis.

These are powerful and understandable individual fears. Many of us spend our lives finding ways to conquer them, to quell their power over us. And we struggle with what Jesus names in our Gospel Story as the ultimate fear: death.

During this pandemic and the recent rise of awareness about the pandemic of racism, our community and societal fears have risen to the surface. We fear an invisible virus and its seemingly random attack on the body. We share the scourge of the systemic degradation of black people that has cultivated fear of persons who look different from us so deeply there are many ways we do not even see it.

We, the community of Church of the Pilgrims know something about fear. Even with liturgical practices in place for blessing people into new experiences, I think there is an underlying community fear about people who are loved leaving, and fear of the hole that is left in our hearts and in our community when they leave.

What do you fear?

What keeps you up at night?

We have become all too familiar with fear driving political priorities.

Jesus lived in a world where fear drove political priorities. The spectre of the power of the Empire was an ever-present reality in his world. Jesus knew that “fear will cause failure of discipleship.” (Saunders) He called people to do courageous things—leave their families and their homes and follow him—but he also knew that the ministry he called them to would put them at odds with the systems entrenched to protect power. Living and preaching the Gospel creates a collision course with the powers of the world.
Our Biblical Story today is Jesus’ stark naming of the dangers those who follow Jesus face. In what is called the “Mission Discourse” in Matthew, Jesus names the threats—the worst case scenarios: arrests, beatings, opposition from family members. It is little wonder that Jesus says three times, “Do not fear.”

Jesus’ anecdote for fear is proclamation—the power of naming, here naming fears, but also proclaiming the Gospel. “What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.” (Matthew 10:27) Stan Saunders declares, “The Gospel proclaimed and lived is the most powerful tool against the powers in the world.”

The Gospel here is defined as the truth that while the powers may threaten our bodies, God is the caretaker of the body and the soul. The One with the ultimate power over life and death rules with mercy and love—and nothing can separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:31-39)

Of course, this doesn’t mean that life for us as individuals or as a community is going to be easy. Matthew puts together a series of Jesus’ statements that seems disconnected, but point to the same thing—things are going to be hard as a follower of Jesus. The peace that Jesus brings also comes with the sword. Rolf Jacobson notes that the sword in Hebrew Scriptures usually means division and conflict. Preaching Professor Joy J. Moore talked about the sword creating the need for healing. She described it this way: sometimes healing comes from surgery and healing comes in the midst of suffering. Sometimes the things that ail us, the things that cause us harm, have to be taken out. The result is good ultimately—healing occurs—but there is a healing process, that includes hurt and pain, but ultimately healing and transformation.

Jesus names that suffering is a part of sharing the Gospel. Suffering is a part of living the Gospel. And fear is a part of knowing the suffering is there. Jesus knew that living in community as his followers was not going to be easy and it would never stay the same. He wanted to prepare them by naming the reality, but also by coaching them to not fear, but to proclaim.
But how to proclaim—how to shout from the rooftops—when the power of fear holds our hearts captive? When that fear makes us tentative and hesitant, when we are not sure what decisions to make or what to say?

Writer Elizabeth Gilbert, author of seven books including *Eat, Pray, Love* and more recently, *Big Magic: Living Beyond Fear*, spoke with Krista Tippett for *On Being* in 2018. “Creative living is choosing the path of curiosity over fear.” That is the “magic” she talks about—the energy, imagination and vitality that emerges when we choose to embrace creativity and curiosity that conquers fear and opens up the possibility for transformation—of ourselves, of communities and of systems. She offers that curiosity “is a milder, quieter, more welcoming and more democratic entity” than passion. “Curiosity is our friend. Passion oftens has a sexual connotation; I am much more interested in intimacy and growing in relationship.” Inquisitiveness leads to living creatively and produces “a kind of stubborn gladness.”

It is no accident that our ordination questions—for Elders, for Deacons and for Ministers of Word and Sacrament—include asking the question, “Will you serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love?” It speaks to the vitality that has the capacity to change lives when we move beyond fear and into imagination and curiosity. The curiosity that breeds “Stubborn gladness” produces joy—which invites possibility.

Howard Thurman, Howard University Professor and Civil Rights leader urged that living in possibility is “living in the genuine.”

> There is in every person something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in herself. . . There is in you something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. Nobody like you has ever been born and no one like you will ever be born again—you are the only one. And if you miss the sound of the genuine in you, you will be a cripple all the rest of your life. Because you will never be able to get a scent of who you are.

It is a powerful commission for each of us—to know the genuine within ourselves. It is a powerful commission for us as a Pilgrim community—to claim the genuine of our community life together, to move beyond fear to action.
We are all living with a lot of fear these days. It floats along a spectrum of anxiety, worry and fear. Some days are harder than others, but Jesus speaks into our fear, naming it, offering compassion and solace and urging us into Gospel Living anyway, despite the fear. Or maybe because of the fear.

What Jesus says in the dark, let us say in the light. What Jesus whispers, let us shout from the rooftops.

Do not fear.

Thanks be to God for God’s love for us, in fear and in confidence. Amen.

Resources


Prayers of the People

We come to you, God of Comfort, setting our fears before you:

- We put our fears of sickness, death and loneliness before you;

- We dare to name our fears of economic instability, food and housing insecurity and violence before you;

- Seeing the power of the empire, in the form of abusive cops, excessive force and the militarization of our public safety, we put those fears before you.

- As we see the reality of violence to our black and brown brothers and sisters, we name those whose lives have been taken: George Floyd, Elijah McClain, Philando Castille and others and we place before you their families, grieving and struggling. We wrap our prayers around the millions of mamas and papas, grandmothers, sisters and brothers who fear a walk down the street, a trip to the convenience store, a run for exercise, will result in death.

- In this month of PRIDE, drastically altered because of COVID, we celebrate that PRIDE is a victory over fear, started as a protest over the tragedy of Stonewall and 50 years later stands as a celebration of the genuine of LGBTQIA+ people around the world.

Holy and Loving God, there are so many people and situations on our hearts. Like Jesus named fear, so too, we name cares and concerns:

[Prayer requests]