

Genesis 21:8-21
Psalm 86:1-10, 16, 17
Romans 6:1b-11
Matthew 10:24-39

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Reconciling Faith and Fear

When were you last afraid? I mean really frightened. Fear is something we don't usually forget. We know the world is a dangerous place. Just getting out of bed is a risk. We all know that fear can test our faith in all sorts of ways; fear of death, fear of failure, fear of being alone, fear of not being loved, fear of not measuring up, fear of not having enough and so on. The question is not whether we are fearful but how can we be faithful followers of Jesus, disciples (from the Latin, "learner"), in today's world.

Today, we hear Jesus give his inner circle of twelve disciples a pep talk before going out to spread the Good News. He reassures them not to be afraid several times. I don't know about you but when someone tells me not to be afraid, that is when I begin to feel most afraid! We know that things are not going too smoothly in Jesus' ministry at this time. Jesus has successfully put himself and his followers at odds with the Jewish religious leaders of Palestine. And, it is not a surprise. Jesus' teachings and behavior cut against the very grain of the ancient teachings and commandments that rule every aspect of a faithful Jew's life. He heals people on a Sabbath. Jesus and his disciples eat without observing the ritual hand washing any self-respecting 1st century Jew knows you must do. He rakes havoc in the Temple, turning over the money changers' tables. He keeps company with those on the margins of society, dining with prostitutes, tax collectors and other such undesirables most see as scandalous.

Jesus is a rebel, a dissident. His popularity is growing rapidly and he is a threat to the religious establishment. The Pharisees and Sadducees are under great pressure to keep the peace in Palestine. The Roman Empire has its heel on the neck of Palestine. They live under the constant threat that the Roman occupying army will not hesitate to come down hard on the entire Jewish population if order is not maintained. The last thing they need is some young, charismatic upstart from a back water village stirring things up. Therefore, the authorities plot to kill Jesus. And, Jesus knows this. He knows that his message of love and justice will ultimately take him to the cross.

This edginess and radical nature of Jesus' Gospel is often lost when we only focus on some parts of Jesus' life and overlook others. This portion of Matthew's Gospel is confusing when we hear Jesus say such disturbing things as;

I have not come to bring peace, but a sword...I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother...Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not

worthy of me...those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it (Matt. 10:34-39).

Where is the sweet Jesus that speaks of love and peace and while holding a small child in his lap? Today's reading is a reality check. Jesus is teaching his followers about the real cost of discipleship. He is preparing them for their mission; to take Jesus' message of love and reconciliation out into a broken and corrupt world. This message will threaten not only the religious leaders it will mean alienating those they are closest to if they refuse to accept what it means to love God with our whole heart. Like a sword it may sever relationships and divide families and households for those who do not understand Jesus' message of love and compassion. Essentially, to follow Jesus will cost the disciples everything. And it will eventually lead them to the cross, just as it does Jesus.

It is no different for you and for me. Jesus' message of love comes with a cost. To break open our hearts and love God with all our heart, mind and soul while loving our neighbor as ourselves is a radical way to live. It demands deep soul searching. It requires us to realign our priorities, how we spend our time, our money and resources. But, isn't this the life our baptism prepared us for? In the baptismal waters we die to our old selves and fears and we are born anew, anointed as Christ's own forever. And we vow to put our "whole trust in God's grace and love" (BCP, 302). This means that no matter what happens in our life, the good as well as the bad, we know that God is with us always. This is our calling as disciples; to go out in the world, no matter the risk, to share the Good News of Christ's saving Grace. But, what happens when we feel aren't up to it? How do we reconcile our fears and still be faithful Christians?

The Gospel message is counter cultural; we are to trust God and not be afraid. Not an easy thing to do when our society has morphed into a culture of fear and anxiety.¹ Do we allow our lives to be driven and defined by the fear or by faith? Our society teaches us that we must save, protect ourselves, and prepare for the worst, guard against unforeseen calamities that lurk around every corner. There is no question that we live in a dangerous world. We need to be responsible and take care of ourselves and our families as best we can. However, when taken to the extreme fear distorts our perspective of what is truly important and valued in life. Fear can be paralyzing. It can eat away at our confidence in ourselves, our community and eventually our faith in God. When we let fear get the better of us we operate out of sense of scarcity and not one of abundance. There is no room for a generosity of spirit. Our world shrinks and becomes very small. We are robbed of the joy of looking beyond our own needs and reaching out to our fellow human beings. Most, importantly we lose our belief that our loving God is a faithful God and knows our needs better than we know ourselves. "And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid you are of more value than many sparrows" (Matt. 10:30, 31).

Last week my daughter and I witnessed a horrific head on accident on the way home from our vacation in the mountains in Colorado. My daughter, Katie, pulled over to the shoulder and I ran over to car that had run off the road and had suffered the most damage. At the same time another woman ran over and was on her cell calling 911. There were two elderly people in the van terribly hurt. The woman in the passenger side was dazed and frightened. The car was so mangled from the impact I didn't see how she could still be alive. I asked her name. I patted her arm and

¹ Scott Bader-Sayer, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007).

assured her that help was on the way. The younger man appeared unconscious. A minute later a man stopped his car and come over to help – he was a doctor from Germany on holiday. He immediately got to work to do what he could until the ambulance arrived. I turned around and another woman showed up to help – I had seen her jogging on the highway a few minutes before the accident. She was an EMT on her day off. Shortly, the police, fire trucks and ambulances showed up to respond to the crash. Within minutes people were all working together, like a giant choreography on the stage of life in the barren high desert of Colorado, doing what they each do best to save the lives of fellow human beings. I stood back on the shoulder of the road as I watched all this activity and thought there is nothing I can do here but stay out of the way. Then, I thought – no – I can pray and they all need prayers right now. So, I prayed for God to hold it all – the victims, the helpers and all their families. As I turned to go I told a young EMT what a tremendous job he and his co-workers were doing and he said, “Thank you, that means a lot to hear that. We try our best.” There was no doubt that in the midst of this tragedy God was present. God was present in every person who showed up – it is ironic that the first persons on the scene was a priest, a doctor and an EMT in the middle of nowhere. No matter where we are; no matter how awful or frightening a situation, God is there, holding it all.

Part of the mystery of faith is then even when it as tiny as a mustard seed, it will carry us through times of fear and uncertainty. It will not guarantee a good outcome but faith gives us the solid ground, the firm foundation we need to weather the storms of life. Frederick Buechner reminds us that God first loved us first, “loved us even in the wilderness, especially in the wilderness, because he has been in the wilderness with us.”²

Amen.

² Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992), 162.