

“Fighting Fear of the Other”

June 14, 2020

Unafraid series – Livestream

I feel like I’ve preached this sermon before. I feel like I’ve lifted up the message of loving others – loving everyone – before. I know that we’ve all got an “other” that comes to mind when we hear the title – fighting fear of the other. We all have a “them” when we think about “us” and “them” – probably a race, class, country, culture, faith tradition, sexual orientation, political party, and whatever else you can think of.

Last week, we heard about how fear manifests physically in us. Sometimes fear protects us. Our bodies are amazing and work quickly to keep us from hurting ourselves. But sometimes our fears are unfounded. We tend to fear what we don’t understand or what we don’t know or what we don’t experience, and fear is a powerful motivator. We can make someone who is different from us the object of our fear. When that happens, it’s easy to give a lot of credit to our unfounded fears.

We are drawn to fear. Even as we look at the news cycle, we have “one good thing” and a lot of other bad news. Perhaps you even feel yourself becoming more anxious when there’s bad news, but yet we don’t always turn it off and change our focus. Sometimes fear brings more fear.

We can easily get sucked in by fear. Fear can be damaging to us and others and can be the breeding ground for hatred. We make assumptions about people and allow ourselves to villainize others. Fear is behind all of the “isms” we fight, and it’s a detriment to us personally and to our community.

We’ve talked about how we see ourselves and each other through the lens of faith in Jesus Christ when we’ve focused on faith in film and hot topics and hospitality – truly being a welcoming and accepting community of faith - but today feels different. I’ve talked about racism as sin before and the urgent need to address it personally and systemically.

We’ve talked about prejudice – pre-judging someone before we really know them – and how wrong it is. We’ve talked about privilege because it’s real – those of us who have white skin live with an advantage over those whose skin is not white, and it’s deeply engrained in our society. We know that bias - *what we don’t think we think* - is something all of us deal with, sometimes so implicit and unrecognized, and yet how many of us have done the work to uncover it? When we know we struggle with these, we have to change them, and it’s work we keep putting off because it’s difficult.

None of this is new, but I pray that our response might be different – something more - in the midst of where we are right now. Overcoming our unfounded fear –

especially fear of the other – whoever it is - is about understanding our common humanity. It's about remembering that we belong to God – all of us created in God's image.

It's easy to say we care, but the real issue is that for those of us who benefit from privilege, we have to use our power to make changes that are needed, and that means listening to what's needed from those whose voices aren't always heard instead of deciding what we think they need.

I'm preaching the Gospel to myself even as I'm called to preach it as a pastor of a faith community. We're in the midst of a moment and a movement on so many levels. The global pandemic has changed things for all of us - some more than others. It has brought into clearer view some stark inequities that exist in our society. They were always there, and yet we cannot un-see them now. And seeing them means that we take action.

This pandemic has also uncovered the reality of prejudice toward many of Asian descent because of hateful and vitriol language used to describe the virus itself. There have been racial slurs and even physical violence. It is deeply sad and inexcusable that anyone should have to feel like this. **SHOW SLIDE:** I am not a virus.

Beyond the pandemic, racial injustices and the need for reform of systems is right in front of us. The most recent deaths of African-American men and women, especially Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, are part of a long list of beloved lives shortened by violence and brutality. And again, I offer an image from the protest in downtown Muskegon on Pentecost Sunday that speaks for itself, and I hope we listen. **SHOW SLIDE:** My skin is not a threat.

In an article in *Christianity Today* that I'll share with you online, writer and preacher Danté Stewart shared his love of running and the reality of being profiled and photographed by someone watching him from their front porch. He says, "Ultimately, I felt powerless. I couldn't even call the cops because they might've mistaken me for the aggressor. This is what black men have to deal with, while others can enjoy their runs. Again and again, year after year. This rage forces me to be angry about our reality and have the faith to believe that better is possible. On the walk home, I stopped, bowed my head, and cried. These were not tears of weakness. I cried because I felt what many of those who looked like me have felt: the violence of an unloving world." No one should have to live like this, but many do.

If this isn't our experience, hearing this pain may be uncomfortable. Seeking to understand it may be uncomfortable. Confronting our own struggles to hear it and make changes may be comfortable. But please know that there's no other option. That's a part of living our faith in Jesus Christ. The church isn't supposed to look like the world,

which is why we literally fight the unfounded fear of the other. We can't hide behind our religion and assume it's all good if we claim to be Christian.

We fight because the "isms" and phobias that keep us from loving one another cannot co-exist with Gospel message. They are counter to the Gospel. The church is called to be with people, to walk with people in their pain, to listen and hear it, to do the work of Jesus who came to bring salvation, wholeness, healing, and freedom, and to transform the world so it's more like God's Kingdom tomorrow than it is today.

We have to face the boundaries we make, the barriers we put up, the walls we build, and the truth that God's ways are not our ways. God's love is inclusive and wide-embracing of the world God created. God's love isn't bound by our "us" and "them" boxes - whether we box ourselves in by race, religion, creed, social status, nation, political party, sexual orientation, gender identity, creed, or anything else. Those may be a part of our identity, but they are not a way that we separate others from God's love.

So we're focusing on overcoming fear and living with courage and hope. In this moment in time, as Christians who hear that refrain "do not be afraid," we cannot be silent about evil, injustice, and oppression whether it's about racial injustice, care for the most vulnerable, or equal rights for the LGBT community. For whoever it is, the call to be treated equally should be heard in the context of our faith – to treat others as we wanted to be treated. Maybe you've seen these words before, but they're for us to consider all the time. **SHOW SLIDE:** Equal rights for others doesn't mean less rights for you. It's not pie.

We cannot be silent, and we cannot be complacent either. We need to hear the clear call as followers of Jesus, especially as we hear the opposite from so many voices. Bishop Will Willimon says, "Christianity's default position, in debates about...otherness is *hospitality* — hospitality that is based upon God's hospitality of us in our otherness in the cross of Jesus Christ." Jesus takes away the boundaries and borders and "otherness" we've focused on and united us into a community of faith.

We're not called to fear the other, but rather to love the other as a reflection of God whom we worship and serve. Moses offers that reminder to the Israelites as God forms them into a community. They are to care for the most vulnerable and powerless - widows and orphans. They are to welcome the one is a foreigner, a stranger, the one outside of their community.

If we follow Jesus Christ, then we watch and learn. Jesus was not silent when people were being hurt, oppressed, or devalued. He was not complacent, but responded with words and actions when we people were treated as anything but beloved. We have to pray. We have to listen. We have to act. We have to work for

what's right – what's moral and ethical – and for what's righteous – what's the right aim before God? What does God call us to?

When Jesus commands us to love our enemies, he wasn't saying it simply for the benefit of others. He was saying it because he knew the power of fear to lead to hatred and make us devoid of love. He knew fear could and would destroy us. He knew it would keep us from experiencing the true peace that he offers. It's not easy or fast, and it may feel very strange because it goes against what's so familiar to us.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is clear that faith and hope guide us – and that beyond those two - love is the foundation on which we stand. God's love for us (and for the whole world) is where we start, and when that love lives in us, then it shows in our words and actions. We are transformed in such a way that love is our motivation.

When love is our motivation, then fear can't be our motivation. And I wonder if the opposite of love isn't hate as much as it is fear. Now I'm also seeing more clearly the close connection that fear and hate can have with each other. Hate usually starts with fear and grows into a disease that's only goal is to destroy others or keep them at a distance rather than seeking to understand and even nurture a relationship that helps us see one another in our humanity.

We've heard that word from First John – perfect love drives out fear. Well, the opposite is also true - fear drives out perfect love. When fear is our motivation, we cannot love. And if we cannot love, we are not following the Gospel whose foundation is love. It's that simple and that complex.

If we love Jesus, we can't hate. If we love Jesus, fear isn't the foundation we stand on. If we love Jesus, and if his love has taken over our hearts, hate has no place in our hearts. If we love Jesus, then we do the work to keep on getting there and fighting fear that so easily takes over. Fear is the easy way to live. Love is much harder – and it's the way of Jesus.

Fear of the other cannot rule our hearts. God wants love to rule in us.

May it be so. Thanks be to God. AMEN.

PRAYERS of the PEOPLE & the LORD'S PRAYER