

/"LOVE, NOT FEAR"
Isaiah 43:1-2; 1 John 4:18
Sermon, 9/30/18

Amy, who now has two teenagers and an eleven year old, had some fears as a two and three year old, some of which they also had as youngsters. They were not unlike many other children in that regard. As parents we could usually reassure her and calm her down with reasoning or diversion. But one fear that often showed up at bedtime was the noises in her bedroom. Reasoning or diversion never worked to settle her. The noises, in her mind, would be coming from anything from a bug to a ghost, and sometimes were simply an excuse to keep her Mommy or Daddy in the room longer. We developed a ritual. Whether it was a warm night, a cold night, a rainy or snowy or moon lit night, it did not matter. I would open her window, chase out the stranger and shut the window, and then declare the room empty of any danger, and send her off to sleep. It was a ritual that eventually was not needed as she outgrew the fears.

It seems to be human nature to conjure up fears, some of which we can name and some of which we cannot. But the lesson learned as a parent is that fear is a reality at some time or other for all of us. Denying its reality does not make it go away. It has always been so. Our Scriptures often speak of fear. I have always been intrigued by the story Luke tells in his account of Jesus's birth. Gabriel comes to Mary and among his first words are *"Do not be afraid."* Matthew's version of the story has an angel of the Lord speaking these same words to Joseph, *"Do not be afraid."* Isaiah, the ancient prophet, has this reassuring word for a frightened Israel, ***But now thus says the Lord, the one who created you, O Jacob, the one who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you: I have called you by name, you are mine.*** Fear has always been a reality. It is a natural part of who we are.

And if that be the case, what do we do about it? Play mental games with ourselves? Open the window, so to speak, and chase that which frightens us, as if magically that would resolve the fear? Likely not.

Pretending something is gone does not make it so. It will surely reappear.

We cannot simply banish war, or end mass killings, or nuclear weapons, or racism or homophobia or a host of other threatening noises out the proverbial window. It is not enough. It takes something different to rid ourselves and the world of these fearful realities.

The writer of I John, in his equation of ***God is Love*** notes that ***there is no fear in love*** and that ***perfect love casts out fear***. Which is to say that Love is the way out of fear. Not mind you a Hallmark kind of love, or a sensual kind of love about which John is speaking. It is the kind of love exemplified by Jesus. It is self-sacrificing and life giving. It is exemplified by accepting the strangers in our midst as sisters and brothers, rather than fearing them. It is found through accepting those whose sexuality or language or culture is different than ours. It is found in seeing them as members of our common human family. It is a reality which we call God, whose other name is Love, and it is that reality that casts out fear. It is that reality that announces to Israel (which literally translates as "one who strives for, or struggles with, God), ***Do not fear, for I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned and the flame will not consume you.***

If we choose to be fearless, we can face down the demons, the noises in the bedroom, so to speak. ***Perfect love casts out fear.***

Edna was in her mid-nineties when I first met her and introduced myself as the new pastor of the Danbury UMC. As we conversed and I asked about herself and her general health, she said, ***I used to worry about my memory loss, until I realized I was not forgetting much. I simply was slower at recall.*** She let go of her fear when she realized that ***God was still caring for her, still making a way for her.*** This was made clear in a poem she wrote on her 97th birthday. A line from it is: ***Will I be here when winter comes with cold and ice and snow? Why ask these questions aged one, when only God can know.*** Edna had learned that every instance of her life was made possible by a God who loved her so much that her name was known by God and that she was called into being by God, whose name is Love. Even her death was held in the embrace of that divine love.

Perfect love casts out fear. What a powerful recognition when we are called to live out our common prayer which seeks for ***Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth...***

If indeed that will be done on earth, it will be by those who know the ***perfect love of God.***

Perfect love involves forgiveness of those who have hurt us, as well as forgiveness of ourselves for not ever loving perfectly. When offered, forgiveness has the power

to heal relationships. It is fear that often keeps us from forgiving, for we cannot be certain it will be received. ***Perfect love casts out fear*** and takes a chance on being rejected. Peace, a sign of the Kingdom, on every level is made possible by people who love enough to take a chance.

Perfect love welcomes the stranger, the alien, the unknown, more signs of the Kingdom of God. Some years ago Judie (my late wife) and I were on the verge of adopting a baby from Vietnam. My father-in-law expressed his fear, his concern, and wondered if we had considered the possibility that the baby might be a communist. Never mind the fact that an infant cannot have a communist, or any other, world view, it spoke to his fear of the unknown. That fear might have crippled his relationship with his yet to be born grandchild. For reasons we did not expect, namely we discovered Judie was pregnant with our third child, we put the plan on hold. Ultimately we did adopt two boys from Cambodia. By then my father-in-law had died, but we both believe that had he met the innocent baby the fear would have given way to his certainty that God had called him to love. For ***perfect love casts out fear*** and opens the doors for the kingdom, the way and will of God.

I vividly recall a family in a congregation I was serving nearly destroyed by an unfounded fear. The family, especially the parents, had been raised in a culture where sexual orientation was an assumed given, and that those who differed from the supposed standard were deemed deviant and unacceptable. The moment the family nearly unraveled was the moment one of the brothers came out to his family. The family split in the acceptance of the brother. Some basically said, so what, he is still our brother and we still love him. Others, notably, the father announced he would no longer accept him as his son saying: No son of mine is going to be gay. Whether he ever changed his mind is not the reason for this story. What is important is how the other brothers' statement that "He is still our brother and we still love him," won the mother over. She told me, although she, at first, struggled with the news, she knew her only acceptable course of action was to ***Love my son and seek to understand. I have to give up my fear.*** Again, ***perfect love casts out fear.***

We get the message, don't we? The writer of 1 John spells it out for us.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God, everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

May we love boldly and live boldly, fearlessly working and praying for the *kingdom of God*. Therein lies our hope and individuals and as a people. Love fearlessly and relentlessly casts out any fears we may have in doing so. So, in the words of the hymn we will sing shortly:

*We are called to act with justice,
we are called to love tenderly,
we are called to serve one another,
to walk humbly with God.*

Amen