

A HOLY FEAR: STAYING ALERT TO WHAT'S PRECIOUS

A Third Sunday of Lent Year C – 2007 Sermon by Dan Stern, Broadview Community UCC

A number of you heard a reflection last Sunday from this pulpit on what I believe to be, in comfortable, well-to-do Western society, the rarest of virtues: courage. I count myself among those who have far too little of it. But this week's readings and events have caused me to reflect more on the opposite of courage: on fear. When, if ever, might fear be a good thing? Is there such a thing as a holy kind of fear? On the one hand, scripture teaches us that perfect love casts out all of it, and the Bible repeatedly encourages us, I think because we repeatedly need to be so encouraged, to 'not be afraid'. On the other hand, we get all the strange, frequently-misunderstood passages in scripture about the fear of God. The fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom, don't you know... What, pray tell, is that all about?

Clearly we need to distinguish between differing kinds of fear. Most fear in our lives is unnecessary, counterproductive. It gets in the way of living life with honesty and with love. When I'm afraid, I don't take enough Holy Spirit-inspired risks. I get caught up worrying, instead, about the impression I'll make on others. When I'm afraid, I'm not compassionate. I avoid the daily news, and the glance of that homeless guy on the street corner. I don't make it to that big rally for peace because it's scary to be out there and won't do any good anyway. Or because sickness reminds me of my own mortality, I get antsy at and want to run far away from that hospital bed where someone who needs my company and my prayers is sitting all alone. Fear gets in the way of the best and most important things in life.

And yet there are times in our lives, times, say, when an accident of some kind occurs, maybe it's right next to us and horrible, and as Joan Didion puts it, "Life changes fast. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends." Or at least every hair on our body stands on end, and you're struck by how much it all matters that we are alive at all. And we're hit like a ton of bricks by the realization that we're not here forever, that we need to say our 'I love yous' while we can. Something similar may hit us from time to time simply by taking in the grandeur of creation – like when Mt. Rainier suddenly comes into view on a clear morning, and we feel both overwhelmingly small and over powerfully close to mightiness and glory. And then, as they say, we 'tremble before the Lord'. But it's more akin to 'holding God in awe' than it is to 'fearing' God in the usual sense of the word 'fear'. Shaking in our boots is a bad thing only when it terrorizes us, when fear becomes a continual habit that inhibits rather than jump-starts our spiritual growth. Fear can be a good thing, though, when our trembling ways wake us up to what's precious in our lives and powerful in our world.

We are told of this little parable credited to Jesus about an apple tree, which in context we find out, is about this same kind of fear, this waking up, trembling with awe kind. Don't worry that the original story would have mentioned a fig tree instead of an apple; It's probably best to go with a fruit variety we can identify with. I don't know a fig about fig trees. I know at least something about apple trees.

I didn't have Mary read the earlier portion of the 13th chapter of Luke, but it may help to establish the context in which this little parable gets told. Jesus had just prior been discussing with his disciples several recent fear-inducing, front-page news events that had occurred – you

can check out these particulars in Luke 13:1-6 if you wish – but essentially, in broad daylight and right inside the Jewish temple, in the holy of holies, the Roman ruler, Pilot, had had some token scapegoat Galileans assassinated. He claimed they were terrorists upsetting the good order of the empire. Then later that same week, apparently eighteen bystanders were killed when a tower, the tower of Siloam, crumbled and fell on top of them. And Jesus tells us that in both these instances, disciples are not to think those who were killed are to blame. Don't assume they actually were terrorists, or that the unfortunate bystanders under that tower did anything wrong, don't think they, in particular, 'deserved' to die, any more than we all 'deserve' to die! We're no better. We're equal in our vulnerable human limitations.

Then this apple tree story of Jesus reinforces all this, saying that all living things, all living beings, each and every one of us, aren't around here forever. We're all mortal. God gives us multiple second chances. But eventually and sure as shootin', we all meet the same fate. We die. Metaphorically speaking, we eventually 'get cut down'.

My father and I once cut down a whole couple acres of very old, apple trees to use for firewood. It was on a hillside near Wenatchee on a crisp winter day. The owner was going to plant young trees of a variety more suited for the emerging organic market. Now apple trees can be kept alive pretty much forever. They can even be pruned and cared for in such a way that they may keep on producing apples for a long, long time, longer than most of us are alive, but eventually, the trunks become gnarled and hollow. Less and less fruit gets ripe, and what fruit does reach the sun gets way too far out of reach to be easily picked. All things considered, it makes sense to open up new space and sunlight to younger, healthier trees. I'll never forget the smell of the sawdust, the grain of wood, and the combined sense of contentment and melancholy I felt as the day waned and as all those noble, gnarly ancient trees got totted away behind a tractor and stashed in 2 foot lengths into the back of our 1 ton truck.

We are an amazingly durable species too. To quote Georg Meyers on behalf of himself and Norma – "We continue to marvel at the miracle of survival in our volatile universe." We're God's apple trees! We're given many and sundry '2nd chances' to bear awesome Jesus-like fruits of compassion and peace. At the same time, each and every one of us is mortal. In the human condition we all share in, we're basically equal in vulnerability. And we all, at some point, get 'cut down'.

But once we face up to and stop worrying so about that, we realize that it's good news to know we're mortal, good news to know we're equal in our mortality, good news to know God's not punishing anyone when people get hurt or die. And once we stop trying to calculate who's 'deserving' and who's not, we begin to make something better of the limited time we're allotted on this earth. We're freed up to tremble less out of fear and more out of awe. We become both tremblingly aware of the shortness of our days, and of how we'll be, in some way, accountable to God for the days we've been given, but also of undeserved grace and multiple second chances. We should be far more inspired by all this than frightened! And if there be fear at all, let it be of a holy kind. Tremble before the Lord, because there's time left for us yet to make something of it all, not to waste but to replenish earth's precious resources with the very fruit of our whole lives.

As the Prophet Isaiah puts it in chapter 55, **Why spend your money for that which is not bread, why labor for that which does not satisfy? Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so you may live...Life eternally abundant for the good of all.**

Nothing can be taken for granted.

Yet we must give God our best. Tremble before the Lord. Live with wonder and with awe. Stay alert to what's precious. May it be so, Amen.