

3rd Sunday After Pentecost

June 21, 2020

Sermon by Pastor Zach Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church
Pasadena, California

Gospel: Matthew 10:24-39

[Jesus said to the twelve:] ²⁴“A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; ²⁵it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! ²⁶“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. ²⁷What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. ²⁸Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

³²“Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; ³³but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

³⁴“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

³⁵For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; ³⁶and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. ³⁷Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

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When I was a young adolescent, I loved to wear sweatpants. I always felt wearing jeans was too restrictive, and I didn’t like their rough texture. However, when I was in 6th grade, and my family and I had recently moved to Lake Mills, IA, which is my wife’s hometown, it was considered very weird by the kids in my grade to be wearing sweatpants every day. Kids would often make fun of me for wearing them to school on a regular basis.

I particularly remember one such incident where I was made fun of for always wearing sweatpants. It was the afternoon before our spring 6th grade band and chorus concert. Now at the time I was only in band (hard to believe I know!). During the chorus part of the rehearsal in the school auditorium, those of us 6th graders who weren’t in chorus had study hall up in the balcony. While I was studying, I could hear everything happening in the chorus rehearsal.



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At the end of the rehearsal, the choir teacher was reminding the chorus about the dress code for the concert. All 6th graders in band and chorus were to wear a bright colored t-shirt and jeans. Immediately, one of the 6th grade chorus members chimed in and said: "Zach won't. He always wears sweatpants. I bet he shows up tomorrow night in sweatpants." To this statement several other chorus members laughed and agreed. Whether or not they knew it, I heard this short conversation about me from the balcony.

Now, this might now seem like such a big deal to get upset about. However, I was already feeling like an outcast in my class because I was the weird new kid who didn't fit in to the other student's understanding of what "normal" should be. Since moving to Lake Mills that winter, I was made fun of for being "weird," and a lot of other 6th graders picked on me a lot. So, when I heard this comment, the fear of not being accepted by my peers, the fear of not being liked, got the better of me. Even though I told myself that I wore jeans because it was the dress code, the real reason I wore them was to hope that my classmates would see me as more "normal" and would finally accept me and stop making fun of me. I was fearful that, if I showed up with sweatpants, I would never be accepted, and I would constantly be the target of bullying.

The truth is that, when you are often the new kid growing up, due to your family moving around a lot, the fear of not being accepted grew and grew. I was often an outsider who was an easy target for bullying. I was constantly new, I was considered weird, and I was overweight. All things bullies were all too eager to point out to my other classmates in order to diminish my personhood. Needless to say, I grew up with a lot of fear and anxiety over whether or not my classmates would accept me.

I tell you this because fear is a powerful tool and motivator that can drive us. Sometimes fear can be a positive thing, as it can alert us to dangerous situations where our wellbeing might be threatened. However, we also know that fear can cause us to act in ways that are irrational and potentially harmful to ourselves or others. Fear can raise our anxiety, and that anxiety can cloud our good judgment and moral reasoning. It is extremely difficult to act in loving ways when fear is controlling us. Plus, fear can take away our identity and turn us into someone else.

Fear has been used over the centuries as a means to control people and their actions. Back in the days of Martin Luther in the 1500's, the fear of eternal damnation in hell was used by the Western Church in order to maintain power and wealth. If the Pope excommunicated you, your life was in danger. If you were a nation and didn't have the backing of the Church, your country could become ruined. Even in the times of Jesus the Roman Empire used sever punishment such as crucifixion as a means to incite fear into people so they wouldn't rebel.

Fear is still used as a means of control in our world today. Governments use the fear of penalty and punishment to keep people from breaking the law. Various political leaders have used fear in their platforms in order to convince people to vote for them. Some parents have used fear to keep their children from misbehaving. Fear of failure can often motivate students in school, and the fear of losing one's job is often a



motivator that keeps people working at their jobs. Fear is also used by the news media in order to get us to click on an article or watch it on TV.

And what makes fear so difficult to deal with is the fact that it is natural for us to feel fear. Fear is very instinctual for us. Our brains are hardwired to fear in order to help us protect ourselves. When the feeling of fear is enacted, our brains respond with three possibilities—fight, flight (to run away), or freeze. Like I said, fear can alert us to dangerous situations and protect us.

However, the problem we face right now in our society and in our world is that we are saturated with fear. Because of technology, whether it is cable news TV or a social media platform or websites we click on, we can get information a lot faster in this day and age. This causes us to also react a lot faster to things. I don't know about you, but every day I am confronted with plenty of negative news stories that can make me fearful for my safety and security. As I look through my Facebook newsfeed each day, I see comments between friends that make me fearful our country is becoming further divided from itself. I also see plenty of critical comments and articles that make me fearful I'm not being a good enough parent, or I'm not caring for my health in the right way. We are saturated with fear.

All of this fear can make us easily forget that the true essence of our being is beloved child of God. It can make us forget that God has freed us to live in the world with love and grace. It can make us forget that our neighbors are beloved children of God.

This is why Jesus told his disciples not to fear those in the world that would threaten their lives for bringing the gospel message. Believe it or not, to those who are powerful, the gospel brings great fear. The gospel message that God's love makes every single person beloved and sacred threatens their control over others. Bringing a message that would equalize authorities and elites with the so called "riff raft" of society as equally loved by God and therefore should be treated as equals would feel like a loss of privilege and power to the powerful. I mean, they were already calling Jesus the lord of the demons, which is why Jesus mentions Beelzebul. He knew that if the disciples proclaimed his gospel message they would be accused of the same thing as a fear tactic to discredit them with the people.

But Jesus also knew that their very lives could be threatened because of the gospel message. This is why Jesus tells the disciples to not fear those whom can only kill our earthly vessels. For Jesus knows that no human being has the power to completely destroy us. God's promise is resurrection after all.

All of this is to say that, in a society saturated with fear, in a society where fear can be used by some to control, it can feel like proclaiming the gospel of God's unconditional love is a difficult and dangerous task. Like the disciples, proclaiming the gospel could cause some people to try and discredit us, accuse us of creating division, or threaten us in some way. I remember back in 2009, many members of the ELCA tried to force the churchwide assembly to vote a certain way on the ordination of clergy in same sex monogamous relationships by threatening to leave and refrain from giving their offerings. The same thing happened back in the days



when several Lutheran bodies were deciding whether or not to ordain women clergy. They had hoped that the fear of losing members and the fear of losing money would motivate the Church to vote in their favor. It didn't work because the gospel always prevails.

And that is the good news that Jesus proclaims to us through our gospel story today. No matter what kind of threats we may receive because we proclaim the unconditional love of God, even though it may create division, even among family members, Jesus assures us that God will ultimately protect us. Yes, it is true that proclaiming the gospel could cause us to lose in some ways—friendships, status, jobs, etc., but what we gain is eternal and loving relationship with God. What we gain is the assurance that we will be with God forever and nothing on earth will truly destroy us. What we gain is a better world as it continues to be transformed by the true ruling power of God's love.

Yes, we all want peace, we all want to get along, but Jesus is clear that the gospel message cannot truly bring peace until it has transformed hearts to love instead of fear. Thankfully, Christ on the cross has freed us to live in love instead of fear. Christ's resurrection has shown us that we do not even have to fear death. Our baptism is a daily reminder that we are free from sin and we can live each day free from fear; however, it also reminds us that, when we do give into fear and make irrational choices because of it, God's forgiveness is available to us so that we can be redeemed.

Because the world is so saturated with fear, there are many people who are desperate to hear the good news of God's unconditional love. So, while some may try and threaten us for the gospel message, there will be others who will hear its hope and be transformed by it. The more and more we proclaim the gospel, the more and more the Holy Spirit will reconcile people back to God. The more that happens, the more hopeful the world will become, and fear will continue to lose its hold over us.

We do not truly need to fear, for Jesus promises that he will be with us, he will give us the words to proclaim, and that no earthly power can truly destroy us. Jesus assures us that proclaiming the gospel of God's love will give us an abundant life and true joy. Jesus assures us that his love is far stronger than fear.

Amen.

