

From the Pastor's Desk

Choosing Love in a FEAR-FILLED World

We are taking a break from the trip in our bus "Powered By Grace". It will resume at a later date.

As I write this article, Christmas is only nine days away. Our Christmas scriptures and songs loudly proclaim words of hope, joy and peace. Then ...

Faith and Fear

We turn on the television and watch the news: Eight people killed in a mall shooting in Omaha; two people killed in a shooting at a missionary organization in Denver and two more in a church in Colorado Springs; shootings near a school bus in Florida; a woman purposely dropping her infant child from a second story balcony; suicide bombers killing numerous people in Iraq; mud-slinging political ads; and today, a government report naming dozens of current and former major league baseball players who used performance steroids. We turn off the television and stare out the window. Our minds wander to troubles within our own lives and family. We think: "Will Mom's health improve? How will I be able to go on without her? Are we going to be able to make this next payment? Maybe he's on drugs and that's why his behavior is so bazaar. My boss is such a jerk..." So much for the Christmas spirit of joy, gladness and peace.

But, here is where the rubber meets the road with our faith and where faith makes all the difference in the world. Yes, our world can appear to be a very dark and hopeless place, but remember: Light is most clearly seen in darkness.

*The people who walk in darkness will see a great light.
Those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them. Isaiah 9:2*

Even the darkness is not dark to You. And the night is as bright as the day. Psalm 139:12

*I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness,
but will have the Light of life. John 8:12*

God is Light and in Him there is no darkness at all. 1 John 1:5

Faith is not practiced only in a church pew. It's our life and the lens through which we look at the world—a world that often appears dark and full of sin. It is precisely when you and I encounter darkness that the light of faith transforms our vision. Despair gives way to hope, pessimism to optimism, and darkness to light.

Beware of the "victim" mentality where you perceive yourself as a victim to the events of life. You and I are not here by accident, nor are we passive spectators of the events of life. As we look through the lens of faith our lives have purpose and are making an eternal difference in this world. Rather than victims, we are active participants in bringing about the Kingdom of God on earth.

The Effect of Fear on the Brain

The dark events so often seen in our world promote fear, which hinders the light of love. Fear is like a galactic black hole that even light cannot escape. It sucks the joy out of life and inspires choices that are often not in our or others' best interest. When absorbed in fear, our brains even act differently. Blood rushes from the cognitive part of the brain where we make rational choices to what has been termed the "reptilian brain". Rational thought shuts down and a "fight or flight" response to life occurs. This is necessary when being attacked by an animal or rescuing a loved one, but it is not where one wants to stay very long.

Fear and Politics

From the reptilian brain have come some of the darkest moments in human history—the Salem, Massachusetts witch trials, the inquisition, war, genocide, domestic violence, and more, all motivated by fear. Unfortunately, politicians sometimes find it advantageous to keep their constituents full of fear and in the reptilian brain. Voters become easy prey to leaders and agendas that promise to be a solution to their fears. An exception to this was President Roosevelt who said during a dark and fearful period of United States history: "We have nothing to fear, except fear itself." Rather than using fear to empower himself, he sought to minimize it. Our ears yearn to hear such words today.

Fear has its place. As a child, after putting my hand on a hot stove burner, I learned not to. When visiting Bishop's Castle (about an hour from here for those who have never seen it), I asked the owner if he was concerned about kids falling off the many high balconies with no railings. He said, "Fear will keep them from going where they shouldn't." As I watched kids running around the castle, it seemed to be true. I know it kept me from going out on some of the precipices! Fear has its place, but living in fear is not physically, emotionally or spiritually healthy.

Fear-Based Religion

Fear can also be used in religion to the point of spiritual abuse. Sometimes people are even physically or emotionally harmed in the name of God. Several years ago, Joan and I attended a week long workshop at Luther Seminary entitled: "Healing Religion's Harm". The course addressed how the abuse of religion has hurt people and ways to bring healing.

I find fear to be a lousy religious motivator. If fear is regularly used in religion to motivate or control children, they will almost certainly reject it as they mature. Some adults harbor great anger toward churches and religious authorities for using fear to motivate or control them when they were younger.

In the Bible the word for "fear" can be translated "awe or reverence". For example, in Psalm 111:10 we read: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." This can also be interpreted: "Awe and reverence of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." This understanding opens us to the God of love revealed in the New Testament and life of Jesus.

God Is Equated with Love

There is a dramatic shift in the understanding of God from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Here we see love is the primary attribute of God to the point where God is even equated with love. The author of I John states:

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. ... There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates their brother or sister, is a liar. For anyone who does not love their brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. He has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love their brother and sister. I John 4:16-21

For Reflection ...

This scripture passage contains some profound truths. I encourage you to spend some time in prayer and reflection ...

1. God is equated with love.
2. Love drives out fear.
3. Fear has to do with punishment. (When you and I are afraid of someone, we punish them or at least want to punish them. It takes great spiritual effort and maturity to progress beyond this.)
4. Whoever fears is not made perfect in love.
5. Love of God is measured in one's love of others.
6. If you find yourself angry at or even hating some one, ask yourself "What do I (or did I) fear about them?"

Is Love Non-Essential?

So, to live in God is to live in love. I think this is a major characteristic of Shepherd of the Hills congregation. Our concern is to love people where they are at, rather than insist on dogmatic uniformity or strict moral codes. Some may say: "But, our job is to change people. What's with all this fluffy love stuff?" Do you really want to change people, or, do you want to control them? Unconditional love changes people. It is the most powerful force in the universe and is the essence of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. True change in people's lives is an "inside out" job. God changes people from the inside as we love them. God knows far better than you or I what individuals need. An environment of love at home and church is where God works best. This is not to say one does not engage in "tough love" by challenging behavior that is inappropriate. But notice, "tough love" is done with love.

Choosing Love Over Fear

Joan and I have been talking about this topic and with her permission, I share something she wrote in her journal:

When we choose thoughts of fear, we don't trust, have enemies and the world is filled with potential danger. Inside we feel helpless, unloved, frightened, unhappy, isolated, misunderstood and out of control. On the outside, however, we wear the mask of

someone in complete control over external circumstances. This is a person whose locus of control is external. They perceive the world and life's circumstances as controlling them and see themselves as victims. Their attitude is negative, hurtful and judgmental leading to hate and violence.

When we choose thoughts of love, we have a change of heart, our minds are transformed and we experience healing. Our locus of control moves from the world outside to inside ourselves, where the Spirit of God dwells, and it is there where we experience peace, hope and trust in an all-loving God. Finally, we feel anchored and safe. We're no longer victims of the world, tossed about by the storms of life.

When connected to God, we feel we can handle anything. Our attitude toward the world changes to hopefulness, gentleness, forgiveness, tolerance and love. Why? Because we know in our innermost being that God is in control and "All things happen for good". We trust that God has an overall plan that will result in a peaceful loving kingdom for all.

A New Year's Resolution

How about this for a New Year's Resolution:

**"I will stop myself when my thoughts become fearful
and will choose to have thoughts that are loving."**

Sow a thought—Reap an action.
Sow an action—Reap a habit.
Sow a habit—Reap a lifestyle.
Sow a lifestyle—Reap a destiny.
It all begins with a thought.

By seeking to live in love, we will be living in God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

I was regretting the past and fearing the future.

Suddenly my Lord was speaking:

'MY NAME IS I AM'

He paused. I waited. He continued.

"When you live in the past with its mistakes and regrets, it is hard. I am not there.

My name is not 'I Was'.

When you live in the future with its problems and fears, it is hard. I am not there.

My name is not 'I Will Be'.

When you live in this moment, it is not hard. I am here.

MY NAME IS I AM."

Helen Millcoat

~ Pastor Bob & Joan

(See this article and the rest of the Newsletter on-line at: www.sothlutheran.com)