

Hebrews 13:1-8

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.' So we can say with confidence,

'The Lord is my helper;

I will not be afraid.

What can anyone do to me?'

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.

Take Your Fear and Face It

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What are we afraid of? What do we fear? What are we afraid of? That is, I think, an important question. What makes us afraid? Richard Bode in his book *Reflections on Life and Living* says that we live in a world that is so chaotic that we've come to the conclusion that only machines can solve our problems, those machines that have computer chips in them. He said the problem with that is that, that can be correct some of the time but not a lot of the time, and the other problem, ultimately, it leads to the idea that we're so worried about the future, that we never have a now. I want to address in this sermon something that Dr. Dalke, David Dalke, addressed so eloquently last Sunday when he reminded us of how important it is to live in the moment. I don't know how many of you were affected by that to the point that you called somebody up you hadn't seen for a while and told them what they meant to you. I know a lot of us did that because of what David reminded us of, to live in the now, and to be sure we get said the things that need to be said.

This morning we want to look at at least one of those factors that prevent us from doing precisely what he said, prevent us from living in the now. This morning we take our fears and face them, and bring them to the table where we break the bread and drink from the cup of the New Covenant. There are many fears that we could look at this morning. I'm going to consider two, two fears that it seems are so widespread that they cover a number of other fears just as a part of them. So I will have us look at two, but you may think of many others.

The first fear is the fear of being known, the fear of being found out, the fear of being fallible, the fear of being imperfect, the fear of being human. We remember the words from the writer of Hebrews, God is promised, God will not leave us, God helps us, we need not be afraid. The fear of being known, the fear of being found out, the fear of being fallible and human, it keeps us from living fully. It means there never is a "now" for us. It

affects young and old. It affects famous people and anonymous people. Just ask Agnes. She said it in a letter, in a group of letters. She said, "If there is a God, please forgive me. When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven there is such convicting emptiness that those thoughts return to me sharp as knives and hurt my soul. I have been abandoned by Christ. He is absent from me. I have come to love the darkness." Agnes had those feelings. We all have those feelings from time to time, I think. But Agnes had a fear, and her fear was that we'd find out. And so she left orders that her letters be burned at her death. They weren't. Too bad she had the fear. It makes us feel so much closer to Agnes, who, as many of you know, changed her name to Teresa, who did so much good. Mother Teresa of Calcutta. They want to make her a saint. I think this adds to the luster of her sainthood, because she was so human that she was afraid we'd find out.

John had the same fear. John wrote letters to his brother. He wrote in one of his letters, "I do not love God, I never did, I never believed. I'm only an honest heathen, I'm a proselyte of the temple." John had these feelings. He had these failings of faith, and this fear of being known, this fear of being found out, so he wrote his brother, but he wrote it in code, and for years nobody cracked the code until Richard Heitzenrater, a scholar. Richard wrote a book in 1984 the code was cracked, the book is, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*. The man who was the founder of our denomination, whose heart was strangely warm listening to the reading of Paul's letter to the Romans in a Moravian service at a time when he really would rather have stayed at home, his heart was strangely warmed. He said, "I care not that your creed is as my creed, but if your heart is as my heart, give me your hand." He said, "We think and let think." John Wesley, who has been so important to us, who continues to be so important to us, has this fear of being known, this fear of being found out, this fear of fallibility, being human. How much more real to us is he because a slow-witted scholar, and I know Heitzenrater, he is, - broke the code, and now we know. It's a fear we all have.

Last Sunday after the 9:15 worship service I was visiting with some of the members of the choir in the Fellowship Hall. I was commenting on the powerful anthem the choir had sung. I said to them, "The four and a half-some years that I've been here, I think I heard a sound from the choir I'd never heard before." And one of the choir members said, "I was the one, I hit the wrong note. I didn't think anybody would notice." He was found out, a choir member off-key, I guess. Can there be anything worse? Yes, there are things that are worse.

It happened to me yesterday. I performed a wedding here. It was after the football game, you know, THE football game. I walked into the room where the groom and groomsmen were waiting to come into the sanctuary just around the corner there, and the groom had a strange request. He said to me, "Would you mind taking off that robe?" I said, "What?" He said, "Would you mind not wearing that robe at my wedding?" It was the black pulpit robe with the gold stripes. He said, "Just right now I don't like those colors." I was found out, because for seven years we lived in Boulder. Sometimes I'd cheer for CU. And anybody who favors a bison over a sheep is no shepherd to a flock. I took off the robe.

Wednesday night I was invited to speak to the parents of the preschool kids who gathered. The whole Fellowship Hall was full of parents. I got in a little early, sat beside this woman who was mother to one of the kids. I started to introduce myself to her. She stopped me and said, "I know who you are. We come to church here." Then she said, "You look different up close." And that's the way it is, and she's right. We do look different up close. Close up where we live and are. Close up where we put on our shoes sometimes over clay feet. Close up where our walk may not match our talk. We come to the table today where he said he'd meet us. The one who said to the woman about to be stoned to death, "Neither do I judge you. Go and sin no more." The one who said to the old tax collector who climbed the tree, "Zachias, come down from the tree. Let's go have lunch." Who often asked the question, "Who do people say that I am?", knowing some thought he was another Elijah. Jesus wasn't Elijah. Knowing some thought he was one of the prophets, but Jesus was no poet, like Amos. Knowing some thought he was the messiah who'd come to save the people from the Romans, but Jesus didn't come to save people from a common enemy, he came to save all of us from ourselves. Too human for some, too spiritual for some, too kind for some, too honest for some, too forgiving for some, too godlike for some, too secular for some, but just right for God. And he came to tell us when we lose it, and we do, we're not lost. When we forget to love, we can be forgiven and try again. When we act like we know we shouldn't, we're given a chance to start to live like we know we can. When we doubt everything we've ever believed to be true, we're just around the point where our faith is about to find a deeper truth- start digging.

Sue Monk Kidd in her book *Dance of the Dissident Daughters* spoke of the deep song within Christianity, the music that plays beneath the patriarchal overlay. Christianity's inner life, she calls it. The mysticism, the meditation, the saints, the art, the icons, and the smell of wine in the Communion cups. Christianity's great song sings. If we mistake it, we can make it right, because we don't need to fake it. We don't need to fear being known. In God's eyes, God knows. All we need to be is authentic. All we need to do is try again. All we need to see is God has promised God will not leave us, God helps us, we need not be afraid.

So the first fear is the fear of being known as human and fallible. The second fear is the fear of the unknown, the fear of not being, the fear of being finite, the fear of death. We remember the words of the writer of Hebrews: God has promised, God will not leave us, God helps us, we need not be afraid. There are lots of stories, I don't know, jokes, on the subject of life after death and what happens, and the pearly gates, and I don't find these stories helpful. Some of them aren't even funny, this one for example. Stockbroker died and stood before Saint Peter at the pearly gates. Saint Peter says, "What entitles you to admission?" He said, "Well the other day I saw a homeless woman on the corner of Harmony and I25 and I gave her a nickel – is that in your record? And last Sunday I came to church and they were taking up a collection for Habitat for Humanity and I gave a nickel – is that in your record?" "Yes," said Saint Peter, "but what else have you done?" "Well, that's all I can think of." Saint Peter said, "Gabriel, what do you think we ought to do with this guy?" Gabriel said, "Give him back his dime and tell him where to go."

And see, those stories are a problem. The biggest fear for many of us has to do with death and coming to terms with the fact that we're finite. We're going to die some day. We're not going to be here. Where will we go? What will happen to us? Several months ago I made a presentation in one of the adult classes here, and when I finished, one of the members of the class stood up and said, "If you look around here, lots of us are getting toward the end of our journey on earth. We have questions about death. We notice that you never preach sermons on what happens after we die. We need reassurance about what happens. We have to know it's going to be all right."

Part of the issue of our fear, of our finitude, of our fear of death, is the unknown. This past week some of our church leaders and some student leaders were on campus, passing out literature and inviting the students in their first week at school to come to the church for worship. I hope lots of them will. One student walked up to David Dalke and said, "Your church doesn't like me very much. Your church doesn't like me." He said, "What?" "No, your church doesn't like me. Last Saturday I came to your church, it was late in the afternoon. I opened the door, it was unlocked. I walked into the building and then all these alarms went off and I ran. I don't think your church likes me very much." She was laughing about it. But you know what, what she found in the sirens and the empty dark hall, a new student in a strange town in a church she didn't know, she was confronted with the unknown. She didn't know what would happen next, and so she ran. We all would have run. But when it comes to our finitude, when it comes to our death, we can't run, we have to face it. And the deep song of Christianity helps us face the unknown. At the table, in remembrance, in the example of Christ, in his life and teaching, in the meaning of his sacrifice, in the power of his prophetic message, in the incredible stories of his miracles, in his death on the cross, in the resurrection, in the empty tomb. And then a part of the story that's often overlooked. What did Jesus think about life, what did he think about life after death? Did he think about heaven? Did he think about hell? Did he ponder his eternal future? He said he had come to bring eternal life, but what did he say about death? He didn't say much.

Others did. Paul did. Paul spoke of eternal life. He spoke of the grace of God in Christ. The writer of Revelation wrote of the new heaven and the new earth, about the alpha and the omega, about how every tear will be wiped from our eyes. But look at what Jesus did on the night before his death. When his death was on his mind, when he faced his own death, he didn't talk about afterlife. He called his friends together and they had a meal, he invited them to the table. When he thought about death, when he recalled his own words, "Let this cup pass," he took the cup and blessed it and brought together those he loved, his family, his friends, even the one who betrayed him, even the one who denied he knew him three times. He knew the power of the one who was with him in death was greater than the power of the force that would kill him. And he faced his fear by gathering up his friends and breaking bread with the people who meant the most to him, because Jesus knew the unknown would lead to reunion, and in death, in the unknown, all we need to know is reunion, a banquet and eternal love awaits. We don't need to know the details, the furniture of heaven, the temperature of hell, the judgment of our life to know the presence of God in life, to enjoy it, and in dying, to face it, and in death, to trust it.

Howard Kushner understood it. He wrote in his book, *The Lord is My Shepherd*, “God cannot tell us nothing bad will happen. But God can tell us that we need not be afraid of the future no matter what it holds. There will be dark days, days of loss and failure, but they won’t last forever. The light will always return to chase away the darkness, and the sun will always come out after the rain, and the human spirit will always rise above failure, and we will not be afraid, for God is with us.” I knew Patrick Ireland. Some of you know him. He studied here at CSU and graduated from this college. I knew Patrick Ireland. I saw him at Columbine High School, hanging out a window, being shot in the head. I knew Patrick Ireland. He doesn’t know me. I knew John, I knew Kathy, his parents. See, I baptized Patrick Ireland at Montclair United Methodist Church where I was pastor. I never met Maggie Ireland. I’d like to meet her some day. I probably won’t, she’s Miss Colorado now, she’s a celebrity, and her inspiration is her older brother, who taught her to wake up with a positive attitude through the changing events of life. Miss Colorado has a brother who faced down death and has come away from that not afraid, because there’s something greater with us to give us courage than that which is lesser to us, that seeks to pull us down.

And Jesus said, “Take my body, broken for you, and the cup of the New Covenant with God, given to you.” Join the banquet. Welcome to the reunion. You can face the unknown. Today we take our fear and we face it, and we live it now. If it is the fear of being known, of being found out, of being fallible, of being human, if it’s fear of failure, if it’s the fear of the unknown, of being finite, the fear of death, the fear of after we die, God has reminded, God will not leave us, God helps us, we need not be afraid. We need not be afraid of anything, or anybody. We are accepted by God, we are invited to the reunion. We gather at the table.

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