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FAITHLESS FEAR OR FEARLESS FAITH?

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Luke 18.9-14

Jesus told this parable to some who trusted to themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a religious leader and the other a dishonest tax collector. The religious leader, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God I thank you that I am not a rogue like other people: thieves, adulterers, or even like this dishonest businessman. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income to good causes.

But the dishonest tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, it was this man who went back to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.

It is a sad commentary on our current society that so many public figures are trading in fear. Arrogant clergy and self-serving politicians have shamelessly used fear as a weapon to serve their own purpose. Muslims are characterized as terrorists; Hispanics are characterized as thieves and rapists; liberals and conservatives portray the other as evil. Instilling fear has become a way of coping with a world that is so rapidly changing the only response some people have is hatred and violence. Fear sells.

In this story taken from Jesus's playbook we have a condescending, arrogant, pious man who plays into the conventional wisdom that people who are different are deficient. Systems that foster fear of those who are unlike us create the dichotomy that Jesus condemns in this story. And as Jesus is wont to do, he turns society's truisms upside down to pronounce the humble man the honorable man. The one who is the least becomes the most in God's kingdom.

"Fear," writes Moshin Hamid in the current issue of Time magazine "is potent, powerful. Fear can make it difficult to behave decently, to do the right thing...Fear can warp a society, change its values, transform it into something monstrous. Fear must be resisted," he concludes.

David Brooks takes this a bit further to remind us of the purpose of politics. "In any society there are two ways to maintain order and get things done," he says. "There is politics or some form of dictatorship. One offers maintenance through compromise, the other through brute force. The founding fathers of our society chose politics.

Politics, Brooks continues, is an activity in which you recognize the simultaneous existence of different groups, different interests, and differing opinions. You try to find some way to balance or reconcile or compromise those interests, or at least a majority of them, for the good of the whole. You agree to a set of rules, set forth in a constitution or in custom, to help you reach these compromises in a way everyone considers legitimate.

In politics, people never get everything they want. It's messy, limited, and no issue is ever really settled. Politics is a muddled activity in which people have to recognize restraints and settle for less than they want. Disappointment is normal.

But that's also the beauty of politics, too. It involves an endless conversation in which we learn about other people and see things from their vantage point and try to balance their needs against our own. Jesus told this story as illustration of the importance of valued respect for others by showing what it is not. Had the pious religious leader humbled himself to see the dishonest tax collector as an equal, both would have gone home justified. . (“The Governing Cancer of Our Time,” online)

Serene Jones, president of Union Theological Seminary, New York, says the major part of the problem we face in our society today is that “we live the lie that we are good and those who oppose us are bad. This bifurcation manifests itself in the contentiousness of an election in which neither side can admit any bad about themselves or good about their opponents. (Time, September 7, 2016)

Robert Kennedy put it this way (paraphrased for inclusive language):

When you teach a person to hate and fear the other, when you teach that one is a lesser person because of the color of skin or a particular belief system or the policies that they embrace, when you teach that those who differ from you threaten your freedom or your job or your family, then you also learn to confront others not as fellow citizens but as enemies. We must admit the vanity of our false distinctions and learn to find our **own** advancement in the search for the advancement **of all**.

In that regard, political psychologist Karen Stenner says that differences have become so divisive because there are people who want oneness of belief, sameness across the board, and unity in all things. A democracy, or a religion for that matter, doesn't promise such an ideal utopia. The old wineskin breaks when the new wine of tolerance, inclusion, acceptance are poured into it. Stenner comments that we can moralize all day about how we want ideal citizens to be, “but democracy is most secure, and tolerance is maximized, when we design systems to accommodate how people actually **are**.” (The Atlantic, November 2016)

And this, of course, is the way of faith. People of faith hear and imitate the stories Jesus told about caring for those different from ourselves, about living in the murky waters of a fearless faith when we are bombarded by people who trade in faithless fear. Fear is a way of getting people to think and act like you; faith is living into what God wants for this diverse world, recognizing that variety creates beauty and strength.

As I pondered the notion of faith, I was reminded of Walt Whitman's poem *A Noiseless Patient Spider* that posits a parallel universe of a spider and a soul. The spider, noiselessly, patiently waiting to anchor its gossamer silk so it might build a bridge that spans the chasm of the unknown is not unlike the soul, detached in measureless oceans of space, but finding something deep within itself that casts for an anchor in its ceaseless endeavor to connect the spheres of unknown space.

*A noiseless patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launched forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.*

*And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch you somewhere, O my soul.*

People of faith are those who do not fear the unknown or the chasm that divides, but rather find within themselves the courage to do what is right, to cast themselves into the center of the fray to make a bridge that connects one side to the other. This is faith; this is politics at its best.

So why talk about politics in church? Precisely because I think the church is the social institution that models what it means to live fearlessly by faith, to stand on the isolated promontory ready to span the chasm that has resulted from those who pander in a faithless fear. The church contains the very filament at its core, like the spider, that is the invisible gossamer bridge between differing points of view. When politics, and sometimes churches, seek sameness and uniformity of belief, it is good to model by faith that strength that comes from diversity.

Each year at this Stewardship time, I ask myself: why do I support this church? Because this is a place to raise our children to respect one another; to teach them that different doesn't mean deficient; to help them find alternatives to the crazy world that thrives on fear to keep control, a world that says its ok to demean another. We can teach them that it isn't appropriate to seek privilege which promotes condescension. And I was thrilled this week to see the results of our years of youth ministry in the Facebook post of one of our most recent graduates, Libby Wiet, whose insightful assessment of the current political situation was spot on. Her evaluation of the current situation is grounded in many years of active involvement in political issues and her active participation in our youth program here, where inclusivity, civility, and caring for others has been practiced together as a community of faith. And she was not afraid to say it out loud to the world. That is just one example of the results of our investment here.

In this story that Jesus told, it is obvious that God does not want perfection. Perfection generally reflects the prejudices of the dominant culture. The culture of false perfection means to live a lie, to betray the truth. God turned perfection on its ear saying that it is the humble sinner who is commended precisely because his scars and his mistakes connect him to the real world. For in a world of haughty leaders who look heavenward to proclaim all their accomplishments and perfection, it is the likes of Cub's first baseman Anthony Rizzo apologizing to the ump who go home justified at the end of the day. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of life, source of joy and fulfillment, we come today giving thanks for the experiences that bring us insight and understanding—about the world, about people around the world, and about ourselves. From those with calm and discerning minds we have learned how to look at both sides of an issue. From those with passionate and energized spirits we have learned how to be excited about life. From those with compassionate and caring spirits we have learned what it means to look into the soul of another.

We are burdened with many tragic sorrows of this world, with the griefs and needs of those we love, and with inner perplexities that destroy our peace. We must choose between faith and fear, courage and cynicism, strength of character and collapse of life. Give us the ability and insight to choose the better way for the world's sake. Grant us the ability to pursue what really matters and leave the rest, like chaff, to blow away. Open our eyes to see opportunity in our struggles and be challenged rather than defeated by our troubles. Be our strength and foundation.

As we continue our stewardship endeavors for this church which we love and appreciate, speak to the core of our generosity so that we may do all we can to support and encourage this body of faith. When the world has gone mad with politics and crazy religious perversions, we need a church that keeps us calm, inspires us to our best selves, excites our spirits for good deeds, and otherwise keeps us centered in your love and grace.

May we be refreshed for having been here today. Turn us from the grudges we have borne, the inhumane activity we have practiced, the judgments and prejudices we have harbored, and the selfishness to which we have so stubbornly clung. May we go forth a more fit body to live for freedom, for justice, and for righteousness. Amen.