

Unafraid: 2. Fear of Others
Psalm 27:1, 14; John 20:19-23
April 15, 2018
Pastor Tami Luckhardt

Over Easter weekend, our youngest daughter, Emily, was home and as you may remember, the weather was not super Easter-y so we decided on Saturday afternoon that we'd go see a movie. Before we go to any movie, I always visit the website, Rotten Tomatoes, to see which movies were receiving the highest ratings. Do you know this website? It's a trusted source for reviewing movies and TV shows. *Black Panther* was the highest rated movie on the Tomatorater with a rating of 97%. That's the sign of a great movie and that was enough for me. It was playing in a theater near us so off we went.

We arrived early to get good seats. As we waited for the previews to start, I began people watching! Soon after we sat down, a tall, young man with long, stringy black hair, wearing a long, black trench coat and with headphones around his neck, came and sat down right in front of me. I was immediately uncomfortable simply because his appearance and I kept hoping that someone would come and join him. Somehow I thought I'd feel better if he had come with a friend. But he was fidgety and he kept moving his headphones from his neck to his lap to his ears. He constantly checked his cell phone. He took his jacket off and carefully, meticulously arranged it on the seat next to him. He kept rotating his wrists and flexing his fingers and then resting his hands intentionally in his lap. The longer I watched, the more uncomfortable I was. And like me, he also was watching to see who was entering the theater. Maybe he was waiting for a friend. But the lights dimmed, the previews started and he was still alone. So I leaned over to Emily and said, "This guy is making me uncomfortable." She kind of shrugged her shoulders, and gave me that, "what are you talking about, Mom, look?" "Not me," she said. After a few more seconds she leaned back over and said, "You do know this is a Marvel comic movie. Right?" I said, "No it's not." So she showed me her cell phone with the movie title on it and right above the title was the Marvel Comic logo. "What did you think this movie was about?" I said, "I'll tell you later."

Well, perhaps you've figure it out by now. With my very limited research on Rotten Tomatoes, I did not know this was a Marvel Comic movie. I thought it was a movie about the Black Panther Party in San Francisco in the 1960's. And I had conjured up this entire, wrong scenario in which this man was racially motivated in attending this movie, when in fact, he had just come to see a movie about a comic book character. I'm embarrassed to say that I had unfairly judged this young man solely based on his appearance. Once I was able to examine my assumptions in light of the facts, I was no longer afraid.

We're in week two of our series, *Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times* and today we are going to talk about our fear of others, how to recognize it and what biblical practices we can use to address it. Because of the immediacy and power of social media, we live in a time with a heightened state of awareness and many of us live with the underlying fear that someone or something is going to get us. When we see

or hear something scary or concerning on the news, we put up our guard or we get ready to run. Fight or flight. It's a good thing actually, a gift from God meant to keep us safe. But most of what we are afraid of is unfounded. Perhaps it's a result of the way our parents or grandparents raised us, or the culture in which we were raised, or something we saw on TV, at the movies or in the nightly news.

In 1933 our country was on the tail end of the Great Depression. Twenty five percent of people were unemployed. These were terrifying times for our country. What our leaders began to realize is that people were so afraid, they were actually perpetuating the problem. So in an effort to calm people down, Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave this famous opening line in his 1933 presidential inaugural speech.

"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Let me ask you this, is that true? Of course not! There are definitely appropriate times when we should be afraid. When some follows you to your car in a dark parking garage or when cheetah jumps in the backseat of your safari Jeep. Or in the Gospel reading we heard this morning. The night after Jesus' resurrection, the disciples were hiding behind locked doors. They were terrified of what the religious and political leaders would do to them if they found them. And with good reason, their leader had been crucified; hung and died on a cross and then buried and in a locked and guarded tomb. And then his body disappeared. Can you imagine the problems that was going to cause? The disciples were right to be worried so they gathered-behind closed doors- together with the people that they knew and trusted. It's a natural human response when we're afraid to withdraw, gather our friends and hide.

We're bombarded with bad news 24/7 and problems arise when we don't examine our assumptions in light of the facts. We allow our fears to heighten and our imaginations take over. The 2016 Word of the Year, according to Dictionary.com was xenophobia: "the intense or irrational fear of people from other countries." When we live with an underlying fear of other people, our actions are almost never admirable or Christ-like. They lead us to do the wrong thing.

In 1941, with FDR still in office, Pearl Harbor was attacked. And in response, FDR issued an executive order commanding that all Japanese American citizens be forcibly relocated away from military zones and he declared the entire west coast of the United States a military zone. About 120,000 people were relocated to internment camps simply because of the fear that they MIGHT be spies. The man who said we have nothing to fear but fear itself, because of his fear of others, acted in a way that seemed completely justified at the time, but now in hindsight, it is not one of our country's proudest moments. So how do we correctly evaluate the threats around us and then what do we do as Christians to confront those fears?

Let's look to scripture for some strategies we can use to work through our fears. King David was Israel's most important king but before he was king, he was a shepherd boy, anointed early in life to be the future king. Initially, he was an assistant to Israel's first king, King Saul. And David was great warrior for King Saul. He killed thousands in battle

and so he was greatly admired. The trouble was, this made King Saul jealous so he decided he needed to kill David. David had to flee Jerusalem and hide where Saul's spies couldn't find him. So as he is hiding in the caves in fear for his life, in order to help overcome his fear, he wrote prayers and poetry to God. If you turn to the middle of your Bible, you'll find these writings in the book of Psalms. There are psalms written for every season of life. Some are Songs of Praise written for when life is going great and some are laments written in times of deep despair, for when life was not going so great, like this time when David was terrified and couldn't feel God with him. Here's what he wrote. Psalm 27. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?... Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage. Wait for the Lord."

A stronghold is like a fortress. David says God is my stronghold. God is my fortress. I know that God is walking by my side and if God is walking by my side, how can I be afraid? And David didn't just write these words, he sang them. Maybe you've heard it said, "To sing is to pray twice." When we sing, we understand the words with our head and feel with them with our heart. When singing, David felt the peace that only the presence of God can bring. David's God, our God is eternal, is able to lift us from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

On some level, at one time or another, if we're being honest, we're all susceptible to the fear of other people and that fear, if left unchecked, can give way to paranoia and hate and racism. So what can we do to overcome racial fear and prejudice in our communities and within ourselves? I believe something crucial has to happen. We have to be courageous and get to know other people, especially those of whom we are afraid. Courage means doing what is right even when we are afraid.

Just a few days ago, we honored the 50th anniversary of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Rev. King was someone who had every reason to be afraid of other people because he stood up for what was right even when in the face of fear. On the night of January 27, 1956, as he was leading the Montgomery bus boycott following Rosa Park's arrest for not giving her seat up on a bus to a white man, he received a threatening phone call telling him to leave Montgomery or he'd die. Wary from the fight, anxious and afraid, he was ready to give up. But it was that night, as he bowed his head in prayer at this kitchen table, he felt God's presence and heard an inner voice say, "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth and I will be at your side forever." His fears disappeared and he was ready to face anything. He knew that God was walking with him and no matter what came, God would never let him go. Releasing his fears to God through prayer and meditation led him to a keen awareness of God's presence and this gave him the courage to face his fears. Reading and meditating on Scripture can shape our lives as well and give us an ear to that inner voice that can take away our fears. Living with courage comes, in part, as we:

- face our fears with faith,
- examine our assumptions in light of the facts,

- attack our anxieties with action and
- release our cares to God, praying for God's wisdom, strength and peace.
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How we can attack our anxieties with action? Let's look at what Jesus did. That's always a good idea! He said, "Love your enemy." So who are our enemies? All over the world, in virtually every nation and culture, those who are different are marked as outsiders, enemies, and they face prejudice because of ethnicity, poverty or lack of education. They can be people who look differently than we do, dress differently than us, believe differently than we do, speak a different language. In order to love others we have to step outside of our comfort zones, physically step outside our comfort zone, and connect with people. To do nothing, to allow toxic ideas that are filled with hate to continue is abdication.

The kind of love that Jesus was talking about when he said, "Love your enemy" it's a verb, it requires action and seeks nothing in return. A large part of overcoming our fear of others is getting to know them and hearing their story. We don't have to give up who we are in order to know and appreciate others. When we can allow ourselves to be vulnerable and see each other's humanity, hear their love of family, their hopes and dreams and fears in life, we find that we are actually more the same than we are different. We overcome our fears by finding knowledge and building relationships. It's all about relationships!

So what could YOUR next steps be to overcome fear and build relationships?

- Start with Scripture and prayer. In the back of his book, Adam Hamilton has listed 31 Scripture reference for facing fears. I've included that list at the end of this message. When you're afraid, like MLK and David, turn to Scripture, bow your head in prayer and ask God to be the guide and strong hold of your life. Put your trust in the Lord and let your heart take courage in the Lord.
- Attend the next gathering of Tapestry on May 1 at the Northwest Islamic Community Center at 7p. In fact, if you want to go but you want someone to go with you, I'll meet you here in the parking lot of Messiah Church and we can go together. Contact LeAnne Hobbs to RSVP.
- Visit Temple Israel in Minneapolis. Our youth will be going for a tour and Shabbat service on Friday, April 20. Tour is at 5:00, Shabbat is at 6. Contact Sami ahead of time if you're interested in joining them.

Interfaith Outreach just across the street is always looking for folks to serve as homework helpers, in the Resale Shop or in the Food Shelf. I have heard more than one person say, whenever I walk into Inner Faith, it's as if I walked into the United Nations, there is always more than English being spoken in their lobby area.

Fear runs rampant in this world but that doesn't mean we have to let it be the ruler of our life. If the Lord is our light and our strength, our stronghold and sure foundation, then who do we have to fear? Because God will never let you go. And I believe that the Church of Jesus Christ can be a witness to the world on how to love. And Jesus calls

us to love everyone, especially those who are different from us. He believed and demonstrated the power of love in conquering one's enemies in the way he lived his life. How we treat those with whom we disagree is both a test and a demonstration of our character and faith. Being right is not the defining mark of a Christian life. We are defined, and ultimately judged, by how we practice love.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of April 15, 2018

Weekly Prayer: God, you have promised that if we draw near to you, you will draw near to us. In this time, prepare my heart and mind to receive your wisdom and understanding. Remove all fears and hostility that have been shaped by this world, that I may be filled with your peace, through Jesus Christ, our risen Savior. Amen.

Monday, April 16

Scripture: Psalm 27:1-5

The LORD is my light and my salvation. Should I fear anyone? The LORD is a fortress protecting my life. Should I be frightened of anything? When evildoers come at me trying to eat me up— it's they, my foes and my enemies, who stumble and fall! If an army camps against me, my heart won't be afraid. If war comes up against me, I will continue to trust in this: I have asked one thing from the LORD— it's all I seek: to live in the LORD's house all the days of my life, seeing the LORD's beauty and constantly adoring his temple. Because he will shelter me in his own dwelling during troubling times; he will hide me in a secret place in his own tent; he will set me up high, safe on a rock.

Observation: Within the confines of time, the promises of Psalm 27 do not always come true. But our God is eternal, not bound by time, so we need not fear—anyone or anything. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, at the funeral of four girls killed in a church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, "Like the ever changing cycle of the seasons, life has the soothing warmth of the summers and the piercing chill of its winters. But through it all, God walks with us. Never forget that God is able to lift you from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope." *

Application: Israelites who prayed and sang this psalm saw Babylon destroy Jerusalem, saw Rome overpower their land—yet they still trusted. Christians saw Jesus crucified, the apostles Paul and Peter martyred by Rome, prayed the psalm in dim Roman catacombs—yet they still trusted. What difficulties test your trust, and seek to make you afraid? How can you trust that in the end God will always keep the promise to set you up high, safe on a rock?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, grow in me an ever-deepening trust in your eternal presence and power, and your great heart of love. Amen.

* "Eulogy for the Martyred Children," in James M. Washington, ed. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986, p. 222.

Tuesday, April 17

Scripture: Leviticus 19:33-34, Deuteronomy 10:14-19

When immigrants live in your land with you, you must not cheat them. Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.

Clearly, the LORD owns the sky, the highest heavens, the earth, and everything in it. But the LORD adored your ancestors, loving them and choosing the descendants that followed them—you!—from all other people. That's how things still stand now. So circumcise your hearts and stop being so stubborn, because the LORD your God is the God of all gods and Lord of all lords, the great, mighty, and awesome God who doesn't play favorites and doesn't take bribes. He enacts justice for orphans and widows, and he loves immigrants, giving them food and clothing. That means you must also love immigrants because you were immigrants in Egypt.

Observation: We often think of Old Testament Israel as exclusive and narrow-minded toward non-Israelites. But here we read, "Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself." Israel's faith stressed God's concern for all people, especially those who needed help. In theory (though too often not in practice), Israel was a nation in which everyone was responsible to seek the well-being of all.

Application: All over the world, in virtually every nation and culture, those who are "different," who are "outsiders," face prejudice because of ethnicity, poverty, lack of education or many other markers of "otherness." When have you seen people who are "other" treated that way, or been treated that way yourself? How can you make things better rather than worse when such ugly actions happen?

Prayer: Lord of all, when difference offends me, or when prejudice enrages me, remind me that you came to change my heart. Help me, like you, to meet evil with good. Amen.

Wednesday, April 18

Scripture: Matthew 5:43-48

"You have heard that it was said, You must love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing? Don't even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.

Observation: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached his last Christmas Eve sermon on December 24, 1967. It included these words: "*Agape* is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return.... This is what Jesus meant when he said, 'Love your enemies.' And I'm happy that he didn't say, 'Like your enemies,' because there are some people that I find it pretty difficult to like.... I've seen too much hate to want to hate, myself... every time I see it, I say to myself, hate is too great a burden to bear." *

Application: Jesus (and Dr. King) knew that one of the most common ways we deal with fear is to turn it into hate toward those we fear. But following the teaching of Jesus, Dr. King said

there's a better option. To those he called "our most bitter opponents," Dr. King declared, "We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you.... be assured that... we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.... the truth crushed to earth will rise again." ** How can you more and more live into the God-given spirit of *agape* toward whatever frightening people and forces you face, big or small?

Prayer: O God, make me an instrument of your peace. Grow in me confidence in the long-term power of love, the world-changing power that makes me a follower of Jesus. Amen.

* "A Christmas Sermon on Peace," in James M. Washington, ed. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986, p. 256.

** Ibid., pp. 256, 257.

Thursday, April 19

Scripture: Luke 9:51-56; John 4:4-10

As the time approached when Jesus was to be taken up into heaven, he determined to go to Jerusalem. He sent messengers on ahead of him. Along the way, they entered a Samaritan village to prepare for his arrival, but the Samaritan villagers refused to welcome him because he was determined to go to Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to consume them?" But Jesus turned and spoke sternly to them, and they went on to another village.

Jesus had to go through Samaria. He came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, which was near the land Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there. Jesus was tired from his journey, so he sat down at the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me some water to drink." His disciples had gone into the city to buy him some food. The Samaritan woman asked, "Why do you, a Jewish man, ask for something to drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" (Jews and Samaritans didn't associate with each other.) Jesus responded, "If you recognized God's gift and who is saying to you, 'Give me some water to drink,' you would be asking him and he would give you living water."

Observation: Just knowing Jesus was going to Jerusalem led a Samaritan village to refuse to allow him to stay in their village. Jews hated Samaritans, a mixed race born of Assyria's policy of wiping out the identity of conquered peoples (2 Kings 17:24). Samaritans hated Jews, who snubbed their offer to help rebuild the Temple (Ezra 4:1-4). Each side's fear of the other had hardened for 700 years. The Samaritan woman was astonished that Jesus would ask for something as simple as a drink of water—yet Jesus reached out to Samaritans, again and again, rather than fearing or avoiding them.

Application: In Luke 9, the Samaritan villagers were rude and unwelcoming. James and John reacted as we are often tempted to. "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to consume them?" they asked. But Jesus said no. Have you ever been in a position either to fan the flames of hatred higher, or to lower the temperature and move toward peace? Which course did you choose? How did things work out?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, it's true that "hurt people hurt people." But you refused the path of fear and anger even when snubbed. Transform my heart to be more like yours each day. Amen.

Friday, April 20

Scripture: Acts 8:5, 25; 10:9-28

Philip went down to a city in Samaria and began to preach Christ to them.

After the apostles had testified and proclaimed the Lord's word, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the good news to many Samaritan villages along the way.

At noon on the following day, as their journey brought them close to the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted to eat. While others were preparing the meal, he had a visionary experience. He saw heaven opened up and something like a large linen sheet being lowered to the earth by its four corners. Inside the sheet were all kinds of four-legged animals, reptiles, and wild birds. A voice told him, "Get up, Peter! Kill and eat!" Peter exclaimed, "Absolutely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice spoke a second time, "Never consider unclean what God has made pure." This happened three times, then the object was suddenly pulled back into heaven. Peter was bewildered about the meaning of the vision. Just then, the messengers sent by Cornelius discovered the whereabouts of Simon's house and arrived at the gate. Calling out, they inquired whether the Simon known as Peter was a guest there. While Peter was brooding over the vision, the Spirit interrupted him, "Look! Three people are looking for you. Go downstairs. Don't ask questions; just go with them because I have sent them." So Peter went downstairs and told them, "I'm the one you are looking for. Why have you come?" They replied, "We've come on behalf of Cornelius, a centurion and righteous man, a God-worshipper who is well-respected by all Jewish people. A holy angel directed him to summon you to his house and to hear what you have to say." Peter invited them into the house as his guests. The next day he got up and went with them, together with some of the believers from Joppa. They arrived in Caesarea the following day. Anticipating their arrival, Cornelius had gathered his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in order to honor him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Get up! Like you, I'm just a human." As they continued to talk, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them, "You all realize that it is forbidden for a Jew to associate or visit with outsiders. However, God has shown me that I should never call a person impure or unclean.

Observation: Jesus' example made a difference, and Acts reported that the apostles preached in many Samaritan villages. But even after what happened at Pentecost, Peter still felt the reluctance he'd learned all his life about mixing closely with Gentiles, especially Romans. God had to propel him dramatically, using a startling vision, to break down some of those inner barriers. (This is a great story—if you have time, read the whole thing in Acts 10:1–11:18.)

Application: Even after his vision came three times, Peter didn't fully get the point. Verses 27-28 of the story suggest that meeting a large group of Gentiles eager to hear the gospel was his "aha!" moment. Have you ever had a particular contact or experience that broke through some prejudice of yours, and opened your eyes to God's inclusive mission in the world?

Prayer: Lord God, it feels so natural, in so many ways, for me to divide the human family into "us" and "them." Teach me what you taught Peter—that in your eyes, there is only "us." Amen.

Saturday, April 21

Scripture: Galatians 3:26-28; 1 John 4:18-21

You are all God's children through faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love. We love because God first loved us. If anyone says, I love God, and hates a brother or sister, he is a liar, because the person who doesn't love a brother or sister who can be seen can't love God, who can't be seen. This commandment we have from him: Those who claim to love God ought to love their brother and sister also.

Observation: At the foundation of all Christian faith is the trust that God loves us, that God created human beings out of love and for love. This was (and is) quite extraordinary. Egyptians, Canaanites, Greeks or Romans—none of them believed their gods loved them. But Christians believe Jesus embodied that belief, and showed us how it shapes life for the better. And that belief makes a real difference in how we relate to all other people, those who are close to us and those who are “other.” Paul told the Galatians that in Jesus ethnic, economic/social and gender distinctions all lost their power to divide us and cause fear and separation.

Application: Why would perfect love drive out fear? Have you ever experienced a situation in which as love developed for another person, fear of that person decreased and disappeared? 1 John 4:20 may make us uncomfortable: “If anyone says, I love God, and hates a brother or sister, he is a liar.” To what extent do you agree that hate for human beings rules out genuine love for God? Why would that be the case? Can you think of practical steps that move you in the direction of caring about “others,” about people that you may see as dangerous enemies, as deserving of fear and distrust rather than of love?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, sometimes I find your ways appealing. Sometimes I find them hard. I need your grace to guide and energize me to more and more see everyone as a person you love, even the ones who frustrate or scare me. Amen.