

“Fear Not: Facing Our Fears”

Matthew 27:45-56

Comedian Jerry Seinfeld refers to the irrational way we address our phobias: “According to most studies, people’s number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death. Death is number two. Does that sound right? This means to the average person, if you go to a funeral, you’re better off in the casket than doing the eulogy.”

Fear is a tough thing to deal with because it is such a strong force and a lot of time it is something that is latent and not easily recognizable as a motivation. Yet, if you have ever been angry, upset, or anxious, these feelings are grounded in fear within us. And we, like detectives, have to investigate and find out what fear is being triggered within us. Last week, we talked about the landscape of fear within us (Categories of Fear: Acceptance, Survival, Control, and Competence). This week, we are going to seek to disarm and embrace our fears.

One of the most common coping mechanisms for dealing with our fears is to avoid them. That is where the trouble begins. There are at least three unintended consequences for avoiding our fears. First, by avoiding our fears, we limit our own potential and our ability to live full and abundant lives. Second, avoiding our fears could turn them into phobias. Third, when our internal fears are not acknowledged, they blindside us by coming out as anger, anxiety, violence, cruelty, or other destructive behaviors. Eric Law writes, “if we start avoiding fear itself, that is the beginning of our trouble with dealing with fear. It’s not fear but avoiding fear that leads to phobias. Because we are scared to feel fear, we avoid whatever triggers it. It’s the avoidance that locks the phobia in place. Phobias are one result of fear when its energy is toxified by avoidance...It’s the fear of feeling the fear that stops you. If you can feel it, you can heal it...The raw emotion of fear itself is actually not paralyzing but energizing. Fear moves us to act -and if we avoid instead, the fear only grows.”

Moving toward our fear is essential to our healing and the healing of the world! In today’s Bible story, we hear about the women who stayed with Jesus even as he was being crucified. They are a great example for us about facing our fears in times of trouble. Each of the four Gospels mentions women being present with Jesus at the cross while most of the male disciples were absent. This is not to say that the women were better than the men. The women seemed to have the tools and experiences that prepared to deal with such a great time of fear. Women were used to suffering. They did not have the luxury of not facing their fears. In a society that oppressed women, suffering and fear were common daily realities for women. They had learned how to face their fears together. They also learned to put love and faith into the mix of their fears. They didn’t let fear paralyze them. It is sad to note that the people who are often labeled as strong are the ones who are deprived of the ability to face their fears in healthy and healing ways. The male disciples were deprived of the ability to grieve and to enter into the depth of their fears because of the social male code. Even in our day, boys/men are not allowed to grieve, cry, or show fear. The results are detrimental to them and to our whole world.

What is interesting is that the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus were the women. They were the disciples who were ready to see Jesus resurrected because they were the ones who were willing to stay with him through his death. The men scattered because of their fear at the time of the crucifixion. They also had a hard time believing the witness of the women about the resurrection because fear was gripping their hearts.

As we look at the example of the women disciples and how they courageously faced their fears, we are invited to follow in their footsteps. One of the ways Eric Law presents for facing our fears is by linking them to their most terrible destinations. He writes, “we must learn to face our fear by following it, probing it, tracing it, and linking it to the most terrible destinations -usually meaning those involving pain, suffering, chaos, isolation, and death. Only then can we see the wider vision of what this fear is calling us to do.” Here is the process for doing this:

1. Name a fear that you have and link it, step-by-step, to its dreaded destination – death.
 - a. How many links did it take to get to death?
 - b. What did you notice as you did the linking exercise?
 - c. Does this fear truly signal imminent danger, meaning you need to do something about it right away?
 - d. If this fear does not present any imminent danger, what would happen if you took time to reflect and explore what this fear is really about?
 - e. How does this exercise help you see the wider picture of your fear?

Try this the next time you are upset and are able to identify a fear. Take the fear of public speaking for example. How many links do you have to make to get to death? If you follow the links, you will find that most of the time our fears are not based on imminent danger. We have plenty of time to deal with them and thus allowing them their proper place.

The cycle of fear for the women disciples in the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus is a good pattern for us to remember. When we face our fears, even if the danger leads us to death, there is resurrection awaiting us on the other side. As Eric Law puts it, “The story of Jesus as recorded in the four Gospels in the Bible provides the linkages, the train ride, in taking our fear to its ultimate destination -death. There, we are invited to open ourselves to the resurrection -to go home and accept our responsibilities as disciples of Jesus; to name our fear, to face our fear, to live through our fear, to have compassion on others who are fearful, and to say to them what the angels said to the women at the empty tomb, what Jesus said to his friends when he appeared to them after his resurrection: Do not be afraid.” Amen.

Prayer Time:

Lectio Divina (Word/phrase, feeling, and message)

Isaiah 41:10: “Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.”