

Fourth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A): "Don't Feed the Fears"
Jeremiah 20:7-13; Ps. 69:7-18; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39
June 24-25, 2023
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Manasquan High School's Baccalaureate service was last Monday evening. Pastor Jim Dunson volunteered to preach, because his son Harrison was graduating. He had a great message for the kids, using interesting props like a container of Oreos I was hoping he'd pass around to the pastors but didn't ☺. The other prop was a giant sign that said, "Don't feed the bears." Camping advice morphed into a life lesson when he peeled off the letter "b" in the word bears, revealing an "f" hidden underneath. The sign then read, "**Don't feed the fears.**" Pretty clever! Good advice to everyone. I'm confident we can all name a thing or two we never attempted because we were afraid: afraid we would fail or be criticized or get in over our head. In some cases the prospect of **success** can be scary, too, and prevent us from leaving behind "same ol', same ol'" and taking a risk.

Three times in today's Gospel Jesus says:

- Have no fear (Matt. 10:26);
- Do not fear (Matt. 10:28);
- Do not be afraid (Matt. 10:31).

At this point it was only natural His disciples **would** be afraid! He'd just told them he was sending them out:

- ... like sheep among wolves (Matt. 10:16; a scenario in which no one is expecting the sheep to survive);

He also told them they should expect to be:

- Arrested and whipped for saying the things He commanded them to say and doing the things He commanded them to do (Matt. 10:17);
- BTW, they should also prepare themselves to be betrayed by their own family (Matt. 10:21);
- and to be hated by all (Matt. 10:22).

No wonder Jesus followed up with, “But don’t feed those fears!” It must have been clear they were now terrified.

Fear can be **healthy** if it protects us from harm. “I was afraid to climb the ladder to go up on the roof when no one was home, just in case I fell.” “I was afraid to go in the water when no life guards were on duty.” I was afraid to dive into the lake because I didn’t know how deep it was.” But there are **other** times when fear prevents us from doing what we need to do. For instance, the angel commands the women at the empty tomb to go tell the other disciples that the Lord is risen, but in St. Mark’s Gospel they are **afraid** and don’t say a word. In the Book of Acts God tells Ananias to go and minister to Saul who was blinded on the road to Damascus. Ananias blurts out, “Are You crazy to send me there, Lord? It’s a suicide mission! He’s the one who wants us all dead!” So God has to repeat the command to a reluctant Ananias.

There’s a lot to chew on in this Gospel, and something that captured me is Jesus’ very clear statement, not just to **those** disciples **then** but to **us** disciples **now**:

“Everyone who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.” (Matt. 10:32-33)

The only other time this word “deny” appears in Matthew’s Gospel is in the story of Peter denying that he knows Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest’s palace while Jesus is being tried inside.

Peter says, “I do not know the man!” (Matt. 26:72) We’re not going around saying, “Jesus of Nazareth? Who’s that?” We’re more apt to **act** like we don’t know Him, than to **say** that we don’t

know Him. We deny Him with silence, but not because we're afraid for our life. We're more afraid of **alienating** family, friends, co-workers, teammates. We don't **want** to be seen as the holy roller in the group. It's only natural to want to be **included**, not **excluded**; but Jesus asks, "What's more important, human or divine approval?"

The confession we pray together on these summer Sundays and Wednesday mornings is very powerful. This part in particular hits me right between the eyes:

Righteous God,
we confess that we have sinned. **We have failed to be honest.**
We have lacked the courage to speak....

I have no problem identifying times I have **lacked the courage to speak** and to say the things Jesus would say. My silence has denied Him, especially if my speech would have **protected** the vulnerable or called out an attitude that **demotes** rather than **elevates** the dignity of all God's children. Silence seems so much safer. People can interpret silence however they want. They're **less** apt to judge me for silence than for speech. But God is **more** apt to judge me for the silence that refuses to witness to my Savior and the truths He teaches.

I confess I'm more apt to counter strangers' unholy attitudes than those of family or friends. It's embarrassing that one of the only examples I can think of when I've spoken up on an actual person's behalf happened in the supermarket. I was in line behind a woman with an accent who communicated a bit haltingly with the counter clerk. When the other shopper was out of earshot the clerk said, "Why can't they just learn to speak English?" And I said, "Her English is a lot better than my ----- [whatever her language was; I don't even remember now.]" It's probably true for many of us, that it's easier to disagree with someone we'll never see again than the people we sit down with at Christmas dinner or the people we see all the time at the club or the beach or the office or the block party or the PTA. This is probably why Jesus specifically mentions

willingness to be in conflict with family in this Gospel. He doesn't encourage conflict within families, for sure. But He says that if push comes to shove, following Him, doing and saying what **He** wants of us, comes **first**.

The verse about acknowledging Jesus before others and not denying Him is directly related to His command that we should take up our cross and follow Him. He has already taken up His **own** cross, but we are called to help others carry **theirs**, in His name: those He calls "members of His own family" (Matt. 25:40): the last, the lost, and the least. Today's Gospel is uncomfortable, so let me close with this Franciscan benediction that asks that we **become** uncomfortable, in obedience to our Lord's commands:

Franciscan Benediction

May God bless you with discomfort...

*Discomfort at easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships,
Discomfort, so that you will live deep within your heart.*

May God bless you with anger...

*Anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
Anger, so that you will work for justice, freedom, and peace.*

May God bless you with tears...

*Tears to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, starvation and war,
Tears, so that you will reach out to comfort them
And turn their pain into joy.*

And, may God bless you with foolishness...

*Foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world,
Foolishness, so that you will do what others claim cannot be done.
Amen.*

"In the name of Jesus, forgive us and grant us your mercy." Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham