

“Not Allowing Fear To Define Us”

Luke 12:32–40

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August 7, 2022

Coaches, especially basketball and football coaches, often tell players you cannot play controlled by fear. If you are afraid of failing, you probably will, and if you are afraid of getting injured, you are more likely to be injured. Tentative effort makes you more vulnerable than throwing yourself into your sport. It’s not easy to remove all traces of fear, there is no off switch, but it makes sense that we cannot be at our best on the court or the field when functioning out of a place of fear.

Life works this way too, at least according to Jesus in our reading from Luke. It is a complex passage filled with many different images for God. One scholar, building off the title of a film — *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* — has said we might call this reading *Shepherd, Master, Servant, Thief* (Jerusha Matsen Neal, www.workingpreacher.org). But amidst all the complexity, there is a clear theme which cautions against fear and invites us to throw ourselves into life and faith.

The reading begins with Jesus saying to his disciples, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Do not be afraid, he says, and most likely in a gentle way because he means what he says. A mentor of mine cautioned seminary students to pay attention to the meaning of a text so as to read it appropriately. He said many people, while reading the Christmas story, will have the angels say, “FEAR NOT!” which they say numerous times, but if they say it like that, they aren’t going to calm anyone down.

“Do not be afraid, Jesus says, “for God will give you the kingdom,” and then he goes on to tell them to sell their possessions and store up treasure in heaven because no thief can steal that sort of treasure and where they invest themselves is where their heart will be. Jesus is talking to people who have already left everything for him, but they still may be worried about how their daily needs will be met. They may be

afraid of how the Roman Empire will respond to their work. These are legitimate concerns. But Jesus tells them not to be afraid of such things, they are in God's care, they just need to seek the treasure that endures.

We don't know if this rids them of fear and gives them peace, but it is what Jesus offers them, and it is what he offers us. And this is good news because there is plenty to fear in our world today. In fact, fear, of one kind or another, drives most public discourse.

Economic uncertainty, even in this wealthiest of nations, has caused much fear. And the common way we respond to this fear is by blaming political figures who may have little or nothing to do with the challenges. Anyone who knows anything about macroeconomics knows that presidents of both parties have received far too much credit and blame for good and bad economic conditions over the years.

Government policies have some influence, which we can debate vigorously — economists do — but the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and our unreflective embracing of a global economy without factoring in all the challenges that come with it, have some influence too. But no matter how we process these issues, inflation and a potential recession stir fear. And for those who were already fearing that their work was disappearing, these added burdens intensify their emotions.

The increasing diversity of this nation has caused much fear as well. We have always been a melting pot, but with a limited number of spices. In the last seventy-five years, that has changed dramatically, and with people coming here from more nations, they bring with them more cultural and religious diversity. For example, there were Muslims, Buddhists, and Sikhs here before, but not in great number. And speaking of numbers, perhaps the greatest fear is of the prediction from the Brookings Institution and others that there will be no ethnic majority by the year 2045, Caucasians will be less than 50% of the population.

We are all aware of the various political spins that have put on this reality, but let's be clear about a few things. First, global migration has been massive in scale. According to UN Migration data, as of 2020, there were 281 million international migrants, only 3.6% of the global population, but still a massive number of people. A significant percentage of them have migrated out of utter desperation. Second, if

people like most of us, that is, white people, are losing anything, it is privilege, not voice, and we have much to gain in the way of cultural traditions and beliefs. Third, the calling to welcome the stranger is among the most common in Judeo-Christian tradition. There are nearly a hundred references in the Bible! But all of this having been said, change is unsettling, rapid change even more so.

And if an unsettled economy and an increasingly diverse population aren't enough to frighten us, the rapid growth of knowledge probably is. Several years ago, in the midst of the HB-2 furor and all the informed and uninformed conversation about gender identity, Dana's father asked me to explain gender identity. I asked him if he really wanted to know. He said he did. So, I did my best to keep it as brief and simple as possible, I did not and could not describe it like our neuroscience children would, but I did my best, and when I finished, Dan sighed and said, "The world has just gotten too _____ complicated!"

We all feel this way at times, though it's not that the world has become more complicated, we have come to understand more about it. But it is a lot to absorb, it is disorienting, it frightens us. Yet, in the face of all these fears, in addition to the threat of gun violence and the possibility of catching COVID, not to mention the loss of freedoms and our fear for the church's future, in the midst of all of this, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid, it is God's good pleasure to give you God's realm."

It's not exactly, "Let go and let God." Nor is it simply, "Don't worry about this life, you have eternity to look forward to." It's more like, "Give yourself to God's work and that will center your life now and forevermore." When we are giving ourselves to love and service, we don't have much time to worry about mundane things. We do what we can and leave the rest to God.

An old preacher told a young man who worried about the church years ago, "Son, if it were up to people, the church would have died long ago." But it isn't entirely up to us, is it, the church or the world? Jesus calls us to live out of a context of faithful commitment, not fear.

In the latter part of our reading, Jesus addresses a different kind of fear in a similar way. It is the fear of judgment day, at least our

judgment day, and what we need to do to get things right before God and in our own hearts.

The short parables Jesus tells are difficult to follow, particularly in the context of the dominant worldview of his time. In the framework of the first parable, we are slaves and we are counseled to be dressed for action, busy about the master's work, because if we are, the master will come and serve us, which almost never would have happened. In the second parable, the Son of Man comes like a thief in the night, snatching God's beloved away from trouble. God is a thief?

But we need not get stuck in the weeds, the basic counsel is clear. No one knows when judgment will come, some grand judgment day or simply our own time of accounting. Our calling is not to try to figure this out, even though an entire industry has grown up in the context of Christian faith which claims to have "the" answer, several of them, as to exactly when Jesus will return and thus all will be judged. Many people live in fear of this day and of failing to follow the "right" teaching about when it will happen. Jesus says, "Fear not... No one knows when it will happen, not even me. So, be dressed for action, have your lamps lit, be faithful in love and service, and all will be well." A bumper sticker put it this way. "Jesus Is Coming! Look Busy!" That is our calling.

The early church understood baptism as a kind of death. They took Romans 8 seriously. Once we have died, what do we have to fear? We are set free! We are no longer bound to an old way with old loyalties and worries. They have died and we have risen with Christ, and note the tense — *have* risen. This is not simply a future event. Those who have risen with Christ from the waters of baptism no longer allow fear to define them.

To be sure, there are things in this world that concern us. There are people and issues that matter deeply to us. So, we have work to do, but not fear by which to be consumed. On the cross, Christ defeated all that hinders life — hatred, evil, loneliness, alienation, and death. There is nothing left to fear. There is only work to do, people to love and serve, enduring treasure to seek.