

June 14, 2020

"Fear Not: Finding Courage in an Anxious World"

John 14:1-27 [Part of a longer discourse in John 13-17]

What are you afraid of? What are you anxious about?

I could be playful and talk about spiders and snakes and mice, heights, dentist offices, things in the refrigerator that are passed their expiration dates, the dark. But fear isn't really funny and we are living in an increasingly fearful and anxious time. I love humor as a means of deflating stress, but I'm feeling like this isn't the time to do that just yet. [As this series goes on there will be ample opportunity to laugh a little more.]

But what are you afraid of currently? Is it . . . ???

. . . The economy; Your health or the health of someone you love; The ongoing isolation you've been experiencing (Chalk Art Monday; for one person it was her first time out in 12 weeks while for another it was the first time to see spouse in care facility since first week of March); The thought that COVID-19 NOT really going away; That there will be online school in the Fall; The reality of painful race relations in America and uncomfortable conversations we need to have, or uncomfortable discoveries we might make about something that is true about you and me.

Additionally, all of the current mess is probably masking other fears and anxieties you've been carrying around for years. There are endless realities that can make us fearful or anxious. And so today's passage speaks directly into our living; including our fearfulness and anxiety.

Jesus is going away. His disciples are getting anxious because they don't know what's going on; but it's starting to sound NOT very good. Thomas expresses his anxiety in, "Lord, we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?" Philip asks to see the Father right after Jesus makes it clear that seeing and knowing Jesus and seeing and knowing the Father are the same thing. Peter has just been told that, in fact, he will NOT lay down his life for Jesus; but deny he even knows Jesus.

Jesus is trying to prepare His disciples for what they need to know before He's gone, knowing they won't really grasp it all until He's gone. So Jesus gives them words to hang onto – while He's still hanging around – so they will have something to hold onto once they realize what they've gotten themselves into, and He's not around to 'get them out of it.'

Here's what He says . . . TWICE! "Do not let your hearts be troubled." (John 14:1, 27) 'Believe in Me.' 'I'm going to prepare a place for you and will make sure you end up there with Me.' 'I have a peace for you that is out of this world.' So "Do not be afraid." (John 14:27)

"That's easy for You to say, Jesus. There's a LOT of troubling things in this world, and in my life. And it's getting me all twisted up inside. I feel lost and lied to. I feel like I'm kind of dying

inside. I AM troubled and, quite frankly, more than a little afraid." To which Jesus responds: 'Are you lost? Are you feeling lied to? Are you dying?' The Good News is that "I am the Way, Truth and Life." (John 14:6)

N.T. Wright writes in his commentary on John that this is a statement a lot of people think Jesus and His followers shouldn't be making. A lot of harm has been done with those who think Christianity is the only true faith. A more palatable idea is that 'all religions are basically the same.' He reminds us that though it sounds good, it's simply not true – that all religions are saying the same thing. Christianity and Judaism never give a hint that the God of Israel made known in Jesus Christ are just different versions of the same thing. And if that's true then what we're really saying is, "They all provide a way towards the foothill of a mountain, not the way to the summit." (N.T Wright, *John for Everyone*)

What we are saying . . . what Jesus is saying . . . is that He is the key to showing us and giving us and declaring for us Accurate Direction, UnAmbiguous Reality, Actual Vitality. Which is another way to say He is the Way, Truth and Life. And here's why He is uniquely qualified to declare this about Himself, to all who are anxious and all who are troubled and all who are afraid.

1) Jesus is **PERFECTLY OBEDIENT TO THE FATHER** and is the only One who has unobstructed access to the Father.

"No one comes to the Father except through Me." (John 14:6)

"I do as the Father has commanded Me." (John 14:31)

Jesus' unflappable obedience is one thing that allows us to have the peace we need to be unafraid, because His perfect obedience means that the penalty for our disobedience has been removed from us and we are now free to obey Him as a response to His grace and love.

2) Jesus is **PERFECTLY CONNECTED TO THE FATHER** in a mysterious way that makes them one. Throughout this entire discourse, Jesus keeps repeating that He has a unique relationship to the Father; they are one in the same.

"Believe in God, believe also in Me." (John 14:1)

"Philip, don't you know Me? If you've seen Me you've seen the Father." (John 14:9)

[2x]"Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me?" (John 14:10,11)

IN JOHN 15 Jesus is 'off the charts' about their UNION

3) Jesus is **PERFECTLY PRESENT** [with us] **THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT**.

Jesus says He's going away SO THAT He can actually be with everyone, everywhere and that "in His name" we can DO even greater things than He did, and ask for and receive anything needed for the journey and struggle.

This 3rd piece about the uniqueness of Jesus is way harder to describe with any brevity, and raises more questions than gives answers . . . but Jesus is essentially saying:

- "It's actually going to be better that I go away now, for what lies ahead down the road."

- "The Holy Spirit (Comforter, Advocate, Helper) will be with all of you . . . always."

- The Holy Spirit (as Paul echoes in Romans 8:26-27) will help you pray "in My name."

That's the passage. Now back to our current anxious and fearful lives.

What do we say and do when we start getting anxious or fearful? And what MIGHT we do as an alternative response because of the Lordship of Jesus, His intimacy with the Father, and the presence of the Holy Spirit? What difference does the Father, Son and Holy Spirit make when it comes to fear and anxiety?

Let's look at three examples of how we tend to respond and how we might respond in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

1) Bad economy and financial loss/instability

I can't pay my bills

I'm losing financial security

*We know that Fear/Anxiety related to finances leads to a lack of generosity.*

May we (in relationship with Father, Son and Holy Spirit) continue to be a generous people; and ask for help when we need it personally.

[Our Families in Need Fund is growing AND people are being vulnerable and asking for help.]

2) Discussing In-Person Worship (with those who are on both sides of masks, singing and safety)

Why is this taking so long? What are we afraid of?

Why are we even considering it? What are we afraid of?

*We know that Fear/Anxiety about health, safety, and isolation shut off honest and complex conversations.*

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, may our decisions be made and communicated with wisdom, patience, empathy, and love.

[Google and article entitled, *Don't Let Corona Virus Divide Your Church*. Our elders, staff, and Church Safety Team are all reading it.]

3) Race relations in America AND in our own community

We can't do anything about the past or what others do!

We can't talk about hard things!

We don't want to offend people!

We don't want to deal with our own blindspots!

*We know that Fear/Anxiety related to skin color and cultural difference separates people into "us/them."* And it's not just true now with Blacks and Whites; it was and still is true with

Protestants and Catholics, Democrats and Republicans, Jews and Gentiles.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, may we be humble listeners to those who have a different experience of life in America, and be honest about the privilege that is not shared by all. May we also acknowledge how we have contributed to the problem – through our words and actions, or silence and passivity.

[Let's start having conversations, start Book Clubs, and pray that God would lead us to reach across differences and build relationships with people we've been avoiding because of skin color or language or socioeconomic differences.]

I don't know a lot of things. Remember, "Everyone knows I'm in over my head." (See last week's sermon.) One thing I do know – from personal experience and 30 years of observing the Church from the front row – fear and anxiety shut things down. Fear and anxiety immobilize and sidetrack. And fear and anxiety are definitely a tool that "the ruler of this world" (John 14:30) – Jesus mentions at the end of John 14 – uses to sabotage our Kingdom mission.

Peter Storey was a Methodist minister in Johannesburg, South Africa, from 1976-1994 – when the fight against apartheid and its resistance by those in power were at an all-time high. Here's what he said about fear: "Fear locks the door and immobilizes us. Fear imprisons the church in mediocrity and irrelevance . . . Thank God that in spite of all the locks on all the doors, Jesus can still get into the church. He invades our places of fear and offers the gift that only He can bring: 'Peace be with you!' . . . [Storey said] Jesus gives His peace – and this is going to sound so simple – by being there . . . that is why we worship . . . (SLIDE) Oh, never, never lose that sense of simple dependence on the presence of Jesus in your life because sometimes it is all that you will have." (Peter Storey, *With God in the Crucible: Preaching Costly Discipleship*)

I found this quote in my EH Relationships "Day By Day" devotional. I'm so glad that so many have and will keep experiencing Emotionally Healthy Spirituality here at FPC and in other churches across the Valley.

The EHS approach and materials offer us some vital tools to lower our fear and anxiety so that we can be filled with the PEACE that Jesus gives:

- Dealing with our icebergs and what's below the surface of our lives
- Studying family patterns of communication and sin using genograms
- Addressing the full range of emotions such as grief, loss, sadness, anger
- Acknowledging our need to be still so we can hear God's voice (His Holy Spirit in us)
- Learning to clarify what's going on in us and others
- EH Relationships offers tools for relationships of all kinds

God IS shaping us. And God IS in control. So "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid." It's not that God will take away all the things that lead to fear and anxiety. He never actually promises that. In fact, a little later in Jesus' Last Discourse He actually guarantees trouble. He says, "In this world you will have trouble . . ." (John 16:33) Don't listen to all of the

clichés and proof-texts that make it sound like Jesus is a genie in a lamp that we can rub and wish away all of our troubles. We WILL continue to have troubles. But fear and anxiety aren't our only options. Jesus went on to say, "but be of good cheer ('take heart') for I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

As Elisabeth Elliot once said, long after her husband died at the hands of people in the Amazon they were trying to reach who reacted back to them out of fear: "The secret is Christ in me, not me in a different set of circumstances."

When we are in Christ – the One who was perfectly obedient and sinless so that we could be forgiven; the One who was intimately connected with the Father and shares that intimacy with us; the One who sent His Holy Spirit to comfort and advocate for us – [when we are "Rooted in Jesus"], we "do not have to be troubled." We do not have to be afraid. So Fear Not! Live With Courage in This Anxious World.