

August 9, 2020

Fear Not: Let Love Chase It Away

[1 John 4:7-21](#)

[The word in this passage that occurs several times and is translated "perfect/perfected" from the Greek does not mean "perfection" in the way we think of it: flawless, no mistakes, getting it right every time. "Telos" (literally "end") means that something or someone is fulfilling the original "purpose, intent, goal; it's the ultimate result (end product) of an event or process."]

Think back to when you were younger; say 9 or 10 years old. You're with your friends or your older siblings. They are pushing you to try something or do something. [And it's not something you know you shouldn't be doing; that's easy enough to picture!] Let's say they are encouraging you (pushing you) to go off a jump on your bike or jump off the high dive at the community pool. And you're scared. You're not sure if you CAN do what they are encouraging you to do, or even WANT to try. You are afraid. And then someone (your older brother/sister) says: "Don't be such a baby!" "What are you afraid of?"

How does that make you feel? Does it make you feel loved? Does it take away your fear?

Or let's say a parent is pushing/encouraging you as a teenager to try something – go out for a sport, audition for the school play, take a more advanced class, apply to a more prestigious college, etc. And your mom or dad says, "It can't hurt to try. What are you afraid of?"

Or it's just you and your own private thoughts. There's a job offer that requires you to move across the country; or that special someone you want to pursue a relationship with; or that hard conversation you need to have with a friend; or that financial investment you are on the fence about; or that step of faith you feel the urge to take. And you say, "It can't hurt to try. What am I afraid of?"

As we come to the end of this series, Fear Not, I want to say a few things one more time: 1) Fear is real; it's an understandable response, whether it's big or small. 2) 'Fearing not' IS possible. And 3) – according to these words from John's first letter – the only true remedy for guaranteeing fear does NOT win out **in our love for God AND love for others** is to be filled with the perfect love of God demonstrated in the 'atoning work' of Jesus, which over time and by the Holy Spirit is perfected in us. That's what John is saying here in chapter 4.

We're not talking about overcoming our fears to skydive or kayak (or tackle a lesser challenge), which may be an appropriate fear-inducing test to rise up and conquer. We're not talking about the fear of going back to school and taking a math or music class; which may also be a wonderful challenge to tackle. We are talking about loving God and others fearlessly; with courage and commitment and completeness (John calls it "perfection"). Personally, loving God and others is a way bigger challenge than climbing a Class 4 14'er or running the Grand Canyon

in a raft (although I admire those of you who have done it). So let's talk about loving God and others well, without any fear.

We could go over technique after technique for overcoming fear in our relationships with God and others. But that's not the direction John points us in. This isn't "10 Steps to Overcoming Fear in Relationships." Instead he's reminding us about the "Always FIRST love of God."

I'm no longer thrilled about the subtitle that we landed on for this "Fear Not" sermon series. "Finding Courage in an Anxious World" sounds like something we do on our own, and in our own strength. What I would rather communicate is that **Overcoming fear is a result of BEING FOUND by the courageous and non-anxious God who IS love; the God who LOVED US FIRST.** I want to talk about this Always First love of God.

John says it two different times in our passage. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us [first] and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:10) And then John is even more explicit: "We love because He first loved us." (1 John 4:19)

How often do we just sail by the Always First love of God and focus more on our love for Him? And what does it actually mean that God loved us first? We often say, God goes first. Okay, I get it. He initiates. This is basic Reformed and Presbyterian theology. God goes first, then we respond; which means we love God second.

But does God loving us first mean He loves us initially and then waits to love us more until after we love Him back? Does it mean that He loves us initially for a period of time, and then sits back to observe if we're worthy of more of His love? It may be subtle, but I think we are prone to picture God loving us in Jesus, but then kind of parceling out His love more discriminately from that point on. We may even subconsciously believe that His ongoing love for us is based on how well we love God and others.

Soren Kierkegaard prayed a profound prayer acknowledging the completeness and vastness of God's Always First Love AND our tendency to diminish it. (SLIDE – show this prayer on full screen while I pray it) Part of the prayer goes:

"You have loved us first, O God, alas! We speak of it in terms of history as if You loved us first but a single time, rather than that without ceasing You have loved us first many times and every day and our whole life through. When we wake up in the morning and turn our soul toward You – You are there first – You have loved us first; if I rise at dawn and at that same second turn my soul to You in prayer, You are there ahead of me, You have loved me first. When I withdraw from the distractions of the day and turn my soul toward You, You are there first and thus forever. [It would be nice to have this last sentence all by itself.] And we speak ungratefully as if You have loved us first only once."

How does our view of God 'loving us first (and only first once)' impact our ability to love others well? How is our incomplete view of the complete/perfect love of God affecting our love for

others (and ourselves)? How is our distorted view of God's love making our love for others much less than perfect; **and even fearful?**

We do need to love others more clearly; more consistently; more collectively. If – according to 1 Corinthians 13 – 'love is patient' then we need to be more patient. If 'love is kind' then we need to be more kind. If 'love does not envy or boast' then we need to do neither. If 'love keeps no record of wrongs' then we shouldn't either. And if "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18) than we're going to have to figure out how to be less fearful in our relationships. Less fearful of rejection. Less fearful of being misunderstood. Less fearful of being alone or left out. If "there is no fear in love," and we find ourselves fearful, it's going to be very hard to love.

So we can work on all these areas of loving others. It's very practical. But there's a bigger picture that needs to guide us in our relationships with others: and that big picture is about the perfect, Always First love of God that wants to flood us and fill us SO THAT we can overflow with that kind of love to those around us. John keeps painting a picture of the real and complete love of God, which God demonstrated by sending His one and only Son – **IN THE FLESH** – as a sacrifice for our sin and brokenness. And it is this sin and brokenness which keeps us from loving God and others well.

By the way, loving God and others is a package deal. [You can watch my Children's Sermon online to see how I illustrated this with the kids.] Scripture in general, and John's letter more specifically, will not allow us to conceive of compartmentalizing God's Always First love for us (and our love for God) while somehow separating it from our love for others.

Kierkegaard's prior sentence in the prayer I shared earlier goes like this: "But grant also that this conviction might discipline our soul so that our heart might remain faithful and sincere in the love which we bear to all those whom You have commanded us to love as we love ourselves."

Doesn't it seem like there's less love and more fear these days?

And it's right here in this community. We have a long way to go to be casting out fear around the Grand Valley. Two examples:

1) At the school board meeting two weeks ago, after presenting the plan to begin the school year in-person, several questions were asked about student and teacher safety. How will the plan be implemented? Do we need to know more about the virus? How can we be sure surfaces will be cleaned? Lots of questions. You could feel the uncertainty and fear. So now what? How can "perfect love cast out fear"? One of the last public comments made wasn't, "How can we step up as a community and get volunteers in the schools to clean and direct traffic and encourage teachers and show our love and appreciation and support? We can do this together and we are behind you 100%! Thank you for your willingness to be with our students and put your own health on the line!" That would have been great. But that's not what was said. Instead here's

what was said: "Hey teachers; step up or step out of the way." That's just another version of "Don't be such a baby!" Can you feel the lack of any kind of love, empathy, compassion?

2) Maybe you read the article in Thursday's paper about the gathering of two groups the evening before, at the City Council meeting. The group RAW (Right and Wrong), that emerged here locally as a result of the racial tension in our country and community, marched peacefully from Lincoln Park to City Hall to continue their conversation with Council members about further changes they would like to see. That group was met by another group. One of the folks in the second group addressed the City Council with these words: "This RAW [group] . . . They need to go away. They're not Grand Junction and you need to send them down the road because, believe me, there's a lot more of me here in the valley than there is of you. I guarantee it and it will not be a pretty day if that comes forth." That's pure fear; zero love.

The only way to get rid of the fear – to cast it out – is to let the perfect love of God be perfected in us; that is come to it's original intent and fulfill it's ultimate goal in us.

I'm not going to minimize the realities in your life that have you afraid these days; or the things that will fill you with fearfulness in the days ahead. But it IS my job to point each one of us (you and me) to the large – or the perfect – love of God . . . and the difference that His perfect love makes when it comes to fear. "Perfect love casts out fear!" (1 John 4:18) God's love is PERFECT! And it's offered to you. And IT (His perfect love shown clearly in Jesus) can drive all of our fears away.

Here at FPC we are now claiming that our mission is to be "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His (Perfect) Love, Branching Out to Serve Others." We will not branch out well or consistently or fearlessly – in our relationships or ministries – without the Giver of perfect love at the ROOT of it all. But if the love of God is at the root of lives – at the center of our lives and our life together – then we have no need to fear and every reason to risk whatever it is God is impressing upon our hearts and minds.

In his *Emotionally Healthy Relationships* devotional, Peter Scazzero says, "We often overestimate the size of the risks we face and underestimate the love and power of God to drive out our fears." (Pete Scazzero in *Emotionally Healthy Relationships*)

Let's not be afraid to love God and others with all of our hearts, minds and strength. And when fear does creep in, let's re-focus on God's Always First Love.