

“No Fear”

Psalm 17:1-7, 15; Romans 6:1-11; Matthew 10:24-39

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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www.nofear.com It is the website of apparel sporting the famous “No Fear” logo. And “sporting” is the right word, since it comes out of the motocross movement, a form of off-road motorcycle racing. A quick scan of the web shows muddy motorcycles and even muddier riders. You certainly need a good dose of “no fear” to do it!

But most of us don’t need optional fear-inducing activities for an adrenaline rush. There’s plenty of fear to go around. I called a craftsman earlier this week for a project at our house and, as I usually do, asked “Is this a good time?” He quickly replied, “No, I’ll call you right back. I’m on the phone with my home mortgage company.” Ugh.

We send our children to school with no assurance they’ll come home. Places that once had free public access now have every type of security. With the planned upgrades to the Wesley Center we also are looking at upgrading security for that building, both for the children and Sunday School teachers and for our church staff and 12-Step attendees.

So this message, “No Fear,” looks at Jesus’ teaching about fear. The purpose of this message is to subordinate our fears, whatever they are, to confidence in Jesus Christ who declares: *“Do not be afraid: you are of more value than many sparrows.”*

Jesus’ teaching is given in the context of being a disciple of Christ. In essence he says, *“If our opponents call me the Devil, they will malign you, my followers, even more.”* Matthew, recalling these words, is addressing the early church which has already experienced persecution. So while we may need do some discernment about our fears—what they are, how rationale they are, and what our resources are to combat them—Matthew’s community knew full well what they feared: persecution that leads to death.

Jesus reminds them, and us, that a greater adversary than those who might threaten us is the power of evil. It is beyond the scope of this sermon to treat the various ways we understand evil. For some it is personified in the Devil. For others, as Paul said in Romans 7:19, it is that power that leads us to confess “the evil I do not want is what I do.” For some, it is what the late Rev. Tex Evans, founder of the Appalachian Service Project, called “human cussedness.”

So while it is helpful to reflect on our fear—to sort reality from imagination and to identify resources instead of just wringing our hands—the Christian is ultimately called to turn from fear and the evil that underlies it; and instead root ourselves in a relationship of goodness with Christ and others. The assumption that such a relationship exists between Jesus and his disciples is what causes him to say “Do not be afraid.” He is not saying there will never be times that we experience fear. He is saying “Don’t live from a place of fear.”

Look: fear happens. Did you note the third verse of our opening hymn? This hymn, written at a time when infrequent travel met that Methodists sometimes did not see one another for a year between sessions of Annual Conference, declares “*What troubles have we seen, what mighty conflicts past, fightings without and fears within since we assembled last!*” Some fear is normal, and it keeps us safe and healthy. Most of us learn the concept of “hot” early and are sure to treat respectfully things that are hot. But we don’t live in fear just because we may encounter hot things.

Jesus exhorts us to think similarly about spiritual things. Because bad things can and do happen we need not be afraid. Whatever our fear, as followers of God we are called to be victors and not victims. My late uncle, a Methodist clergyman, would begin each day with the first part of Psalm 118:24: “This is the day that the Lord has made” and those within earshot knew to reply “Let us rejoice and be glad in it.” Today’s Gospel has, as you may guess, one of my favorite verses: “Even the hairs of your head are all counted.” Big deal, right? Mine have names! Credit to Bill Hurd, a life-long Methodist friend, for that quick rejoinder.

More thoughtfully, the late Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City 60 years ago, identified the heart of the challenge: *“Whatever the situation...and however... disheartening it may be, it is a great hour when a person ceases adopting difficulties as an excuse for despondency and tackles themselves as the real problem. No mood need be their master... Remember others. Emotions are contagious...and can infect a whole household.”*

So how do we become people of “No Fear?” One is to realize that our fears may provide us important **information** but little **inspiration**. We will soon launch our capital campaign entitled “Lift Us Up” to raise the funds to make our Wesley Center handicapped accessible. Part of the committee met the other evening and there was an admirable evidence of concern for our people whose financial situation may not allow them to contribute dollars. I agreed with the sensitivity expressed. But I also reminded the committee that the day we announced that the project was moving forward, this congregation erupted into applause! Why? Because this project has been talked about for many years and we are finally acting! God has blessed us and we are acting to live out the motto that appears every week on our bulletin cover, *“Whoever you are, wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you are welcome here.”* So, yes, we will be sensitive and provide multiple ways for people to engage this project so that no one feels burdened. But we will also inspire one another with its importance and the way it helps make Christ’s ministry here truly welcoming and accessible.

Another way to become people of “no fear” is to live for God openly, or “acknowledge God” as Matthew says. That seems counter-intuitive. If the threat is death for being a disciple, why speak openly?

Because you can’t save your own life. Only Jesus does that. Those who seek to save their lives will lose them but those who lose their life for Christ’s sake will find it. Our “Friends of Appalachia” volunteers are living their faith openly. So are our UMARMY workers recently returned from Springfield and others soon to head to Maine.

Sacrificial service is not limited to work projects. Caring for each other as we face challenges of aging and health; helping us plan a wonderful beach party on July 20th; service in the church in myriad ways: all these take to heart Fosdick's admonition to "remember others."

What's more, they displace fear. There usually isn't room to be afraid **and** act for God. Some of you know that I am nervous every Sunday morning. The nerves do not end until worship begins. The point is that once all has been planned as well as humans can plan anything, it is jettisoning my expectations, trusting the Holy Spirit, and getting on with it that takes care of nervousness and fear. True not only for worship but for all of life!

So we can fear, or we can act. Jesus invites action: sacrificial action, loving action, decisive action in response to the needs of others. This is what ministry is about. This is what discipleship is about. This is what the cross is about. When we act in trust, fear runs away; we reclaim our sacred worth as "of more value than many sparrows;" and we find in the life we have given away the essence of power and purpose because of Jesus' love:

*"God sent his Son, they called him Jesus;
he came to love, heal and forgive;
He lived and died to buy my pardon,
an empty grave is there to prove my Savior lives.
Because he lives, I can face tomorrow;
because he lives, all fear is gone;
Because I know he holds the future,
and life is worth the living just because he lives."*