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Luke 19:11-21
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OUR FEARS AND OUR FAILURES

(A Communion Sermon)

There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, which tells us that in the presence of Queen Elizabeth, Sir Walter Raleigh once scratched with a diamond on a windowpane the words "Fain would I climb, yet fear I to fall." The Queen is supposed to have added beneath, "If thy heart fail thee, climb not at all."

When I first read the quotation from Raleigh I was inclined to alter it: "Often would I attempt, save for fear of failing." If the story is true then Sir Walter was expressing what must be a universal emotion when men and women are confronted with certain difficult situations. If the fear which possesses us is great enough it will often prevent us from acting at all, and if we do act that feeling of fear may cause such a lack of confidence as to permit us to accomplish much less than our highest potential. Our failures are often directly related to our fears.

Boswell, in his Life of Johnson says of the Emperor, Charles V, that when he read upon the tombstone of a Spanish nobleman, "Here lies one who never knew fear," replied wittily, "Then he never snuffed a candle with his fingers."

There are of course many kinds of fears. Some are large and real; some are small and irrational. Some people are indeed afraid of snuffing a candle with their fingers, or of receiving small electric shocks, or of speaking before groups of people. Concerning the latter, I have always felt that the group had more to fear than the speaker, but it is a fear all have known who have ever spoken to any group. In my own case it has never completely vanished.

Then there are the phobias; fear of high places, fear of the water, fear of elevators, fear of certain animals, fear of being closed up in a small place, and the list is almost endless. As we have already said, some of our fears are rational and some are irrational, but all can be very real, and whether they be one or the other, they can keep us from success and be the cause of many of our failures.

II

Now I would like to point out that there is one kind of fear that is good. It can itself banish many of the fears which are not good. One can read about this kind in the Bible and no doubt it has caused some confusion and difficulty to very sincere people. Fear is sometimes recommended in the scriptures. In the Old Testament we are reminded that, "Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom", and over and over again the Hebrews were admonished to fear the Lord.

But again, we have difficulties with the translation, for this is not the fear we mean when we talk about fearing war or being afraid of natural disasters. What is meant here is awe, respect, reverence. It is a fear that inspires, not one which makes afraid, filling us with terror and dread. There is a respectful and reverent fear on the one hand, and there is a craven and a dreadful apprehension on the other. The two things are not the same.

The servant who was entrusted with some of his master's money and buried it in the ground in order that it might be safe did not do so because he respected his master, but because he feared him; "I was afraid of you because you are a hard man."

Now Jesus condemned this attitude in his parable. "To be sure," he suggested, "God is just and righteous and therefore must be respected, but God is also love and is not to be feared."

So what we want to emphasize is that if we have a proper and a mature understanding of God as Jesus revealed him to us, then we will not be afraid of him, but we will be in awe of him. Our awe and respect will lead us to a faith which will cast out our fears and our dread. God is perfect love. Should we be afraid of perfect love? But he is a God of perfect justice. Justice should instill in us some holy awe and respect.

It is because God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent that some of us so dislike language that profanes his name, and popular songs that treat him as if he were our buddy and our pal. Such familiarity does indeed breed contempt for God. How can we honor, respect, and worship a God who is little or nothing more than we ourselves?

III

Now consider Jesus at the Last Supper. By this time he surely knows that his life is to be short, that death awaits him unless he changes his course. He has already decided that he will not change his course. His very words at the institution of the Sacrament reveal his knowledge of the inevitable:

"This is my body... this is my blood."

Is he afraid? Of course he is afraid. He may have been the perfect man, but he was still a man. Anyone in a similar position who claimed not to be fearful would be either a liar or a fool. Fear is the natural human emotion in such a situation. But Jesus' awareness of the greatness, the goodness, and the majesty of God, of which all men should stand in awe and respect, generated within Jesus a faith and a confidence that was greater than his fear.

Shakespeare has Hamlet declare that, "Conscience does make cowards of us all". Fear can do it too. It is only when our fear of what may happen to us is replaced with respect and confidence in the goodness and the greatness of God that we are saved from cowardice.

I have qualms nearly every Sunday morning as I mount this pulpit. I ask myself what right I have to be here and sometimes inwardly tremble. But I also have a strong confidence that God has called me to be a spokesman for him, however weak I may be, and that he is with me. I can do whatever it is he asks me to do. My fear of God is greater than my fear of anything that may happen to me in this life. My religious awe overcomes my worldly apprehension.

Some of you must surely have had that same experience. Your search for God, your personal experience with him has surely revealed to you that he is not to be feared and that he is indeed perfect love. His ways are not our ways, but praise him for that. When we walk in his ways we discover him whom we must reverence and respect, but of whom we cannot be afraid.

How hard it was for Peter to learn this lesson. When Jesus determined to go to Jerusalem and thus to death, Peter cried, "Don't do it, Lord, don't do it! You know what they'll do to you. Don't go." Peter's fear of men was at that time so much greater than his faith in God. What was it Jesus said to him: "You think as men think, not as God thinks." What does that mean? Surely this; "You are filled with fear rather than with faith."

Later Peter denied he had ever known Christ. He was afraid. His fear led him once more to failure. His faith was weak because he did not really know and understand God until he saw God's love fully revealed on the Cross. Then he knew. Then he understood; "Perfect love casts out fear." Now he had the faith with which to overcome his fear.

There is an inscription over the mantle of the Hind's Head Hotel in England. It reads:

"Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered.
No one was there."

Fear is a part of life. Often it is a good part, warning us and protecting us against that which would harm us. But often it is a false alarm, robbing us of our power and potential and causing us to fail where we should succeed. The antidote is faith in the goodness and the mercy of him whose kindness and love never fail and of whom we need never to be afraid.