Sermon 02-02-2020

Fear of the Other

UnAfraid: Living with Courage and Hope

Psalm 27:1 and 14, Matthew 5:43-44 and I John 4:18a and 19

**Sermon Starter**

From time to time I take a break from the information overload we are bombarded with on the television and radio and watch something a bit more soothing, like Discovery Channel, Animal Planet, or any one of Jack Hanna’s many animal programs, like Into the Wild or Wild Countdown. Occasionally you can find an episode where “Jungle Jack” as he liked to be called, goes on a short safari to bring us some of the wildlife of Africa. One of places he goes is Kruger National Park in South Africa, where visitors can stay in tent lodging, surrounded by protective fences, right next to a watering hole where they could watch giraffe, elephants, zebra, impala and a host of other animals drinking in the wild.

One thing a person may notice is that the impala has a marking on their hindquarters that is distinctive – it looks like an M as you can see here, **PHOTO: IMPALA.** It has been pointed out, “In the African jungle that M stands for McDonalds – you see, the impala and other antelope are to the lions, the cheetahs, even crocodiles hiding in the watering holes, what McDonalds’ hamburgers are to us!” That’s why they are so skittish. When they hear a sound, no matter what it is they jump, always on high alert, afraid they’ll get eaten. **GRAPHIC: WATERING HOLE**

We’re in the midst of a series of sermons about fear and living UnAfraid – living with courage and hope and today we’re going to talk about the fear of the other – the fear of our enemies, or those we perceive could be enemies. Fear is our mind and body’s reaction to threat. Fear can be a very good thing – for the impala it is what helps keep an animal from being eaten. But it is possible to feel threatened by that which is not a threat. It is possible to be afraid of that which we don’t need to be afraid. And many of us live our lives like the impala, constantly skittish and afraid.

Unfortunately for us, living in fear often has disastrous consequences and so much of the tragedy that happens in the world has to do with the fear of the other.

**I. The Causes and Effects of Fear of the Other**

As we’ve learned, our fear mechanism is a good one. It leads to the fight or flight response when we feel threatened. The challenge is that our sensors are a bit hyperactive and, coupled with our imagination, the media and often the fear-mongering that comes with politics, we can find ourselves ready to flee, or fight, when there is not really a threat.

We tend as humans to fear those who are different from ourselves. Those differences include race, ethnicity, differences in socio-economic status, politics, religion, a person’s sexual orientation and so many more. The differences can make us a bit uncomfortable, but that discomfort fueled by our imagination, our perception of the world, our upbringing, our culture, the media, religious leaders and politicians, can lead us to be afraid.

Each generation has had a new enemy to fear, and often multiple people or groups meant to scare us – it makes for great fundraising and fear is highly motivating in politics. With the Iowa Caucuses tomorrow, I’m reminded of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s famous line from his First Inaugural Address, given at a time when the depression was at its lowest point – with 25% of the population unemployed, and you may remember his famous words, **VIDEO: FDR INAUGURATION – NOTHING TO FEAR.** But in 1942, not long after Pearl Harbor, American fear of the Japanese was so great that this same president gave an Executive Order to forcibly relocate over 100,000 Japanese Americans, most American citizens, from the coasts of the country for fear that they might be spies.

Throughout our history, fear of the other has been most enduring in the relationship between whites and blacks. For example, take the case of Homer Plessy of New Orleans. Plessy was 7/8ths white. He was 1/8th black. **GRAPHIC: HOMER PLESSY PHOTO**. In 1890 the state of Louisiana passed a law requiring blacks to ride in separate rail cars from whites. Because he was 1/8 black, he could not legally ride in the white car – no one would have known, but he and a group of others sought to strike down this law, and they informed the railroads of his ethnicity. In 1892, at the age of 30, Homer Plessy bought a first-class rail ticket from New Orleans to Covington and sat in the white’s only car to challenge the state law. He was subsequently arrested. The state Supreme Court upheld the law and it went all the way to the US Supreme Court. In the 1896 case called Plessy v Ferguson, the US Supreme Court made “separate but equal” legal across the land.

This led to separate but equal schools, drinking fountains, swimming pools, rail cars and more. I’ve often wondered what fear led people to think that we needed this: **PHOTO: DRINKING FOUNTAINS**. What fears led to separate drinking fountains as we see in this 1950 photograph taken in North Carolina?

In what ways does fear of the other shape us today? Who is the other? Listen, fear is an equal opportunity problem. Race has been a huge issue in the last two years. But so too is religion – we have a hard time differentiating between Islamic terrorists and Islam. We see ISIS everywhere. And there are just enough cases of violence in the name of Islam, played over and over again by the media, that we find ourselves truly scared of Muslims, or people who look like Muslims.

Take your pick of others we’re afraid of – gays? Mexicans? Liberals? But today I hear a lot of people afraid of conservatives, or, do a Google search for President Trump and Fear and you’ll come up with 103,000,000 hits, the top all warning that we should be afraid.

I know you get it. So, let’s shift gears. We can live in fear of the other, and we can act out of that fear. We can build communities for people who look just like us, believe just like us, and seek to flee from those we believe are a threat. Or we can find ways to prepare to fight our fears.

Let’s look not at what we do about guns, or liberals or conservatives, let’s talk about how we address our fears that leave us anxious.

**II. Overcoming Our Fears with Facts**

If you find yourself struggling with fear of the other, one therapeutic tool that can be terribly important in living with courage and hope is called **GRAPHIC: Cognitive Restructuring**. In a more common vernacular it is eliminating “stinkin’ thinkin’” or overcoming irrational thoughts with facts and retraining your thinking. There’s much more to this than I’m offering you here – and I want to encourage you that this is a very helpful tool in a therapist’s arsenal to help you overcome fear. But I’d like you to at least be aware of how it works.

**GRAPHIC: COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING** Cognitive restructuring begins by carefully unpacking what it is that is creating the greatest fear for you. These are sometimes identified as Automatic Thoughts – convictions or tapes you play in your head – things that you have come to accept as true about yourself, others or the world. Often these thoughts are distortions of reality – this includes either-or, black and white thinking, catastrophizing, jumping to conclusions, assuming the worst.

An important part of this therapeutic method is to hold any horrible and frightening thought, story, truth with a grain of skepticism. And the next step is to research and seek to discover if the thing you’ve heard that has got you upset is actually true. From there you begin to develop a way of reminding yourself that the thought that scares you is not in fact true. **GRAPHIC: EEYORE IS COOL.** Eventually, using this method, you retrain your stinkin-thinkin and conquer your fears.

It is sort of like going to www.snopes.com to fact check something. Again, there is far more to this and a therapist can help you use this tool, but I’ll give you a couple of examples.

Americans routinely report that they believe violent crime is on the rise in the US. This is easy to understand. With 24-hour news we see a great deal of crime on the news, then we watch true crime television shows and go to the movies where we see more crime. We hear of terrible crimes – mass shootings and the like. It would be natural for this to lead us to feel unsafe.

So, one thing I might do, if I worry about feeling unsafe, would be to find out what’s actually happening in violent crime rates. And if we do that, we would find that this is the reality according to the FBI and the Justice Department statistics, **GRAPHIC: CHART ON VIOLENT CRIME**. That one piece of information may make us feel differently. But then we’ve got to internalize this and retrain our thinking. We likely know this, but the most likely victim of a violent crime according to the Justice department is a poor black man living in the inner city. Most often violent crime happens with someone the victim knows.

But here’s a statistic I find amazing. There are 16,214 murders in America in 2018, the last year statistics are available. There are 250,000 deaths by medical error in hospitals each year. We are 15 times more likely to die as a result of medical error than by being killed with a gun. I’m not trying to make us afraid of getting treatment, but to encourage us to look for the facts before letting our fears control us.

**III. Whom Shall I Fear?**

So, carefully evaluating what is making us afraid, looking for the facts, moving away from either-or thinking and generalizations can help us not be afraid. The world is not nearly so scary as we fear. In fact, according to crime statistics, we’re significantly safer than we were twenty years ago.

But in addition to skepticism about the things that scare us, and challenging our stinkin-thinking with facts, we turn to our faith. I find it interesting that some of the most scared people in our country are people who claim to be Christians.

But let’s return to our scriptures. I love what we read in Psalm 27, written by David, a song about where he turned when he was afraid of his enemies – real enemies who sought to destroy him. Let’s read our scripture verse from Psalm 27:1 together, **GRAPHIC:**

**The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?…Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!**

It’s one thing to read this scripture, but its another thing to internalize it. We read various scriptures of confidence and hope meant to help ease our anxiety. But we can simply read this and it may mean nothing to us. There’s another way of reading scripture that begins to allow it to sink in. It is called, **GRAPHIC: *Lectio Divina*** – a phrase that means, “Divine Reading.” We talked about Lectio Divina last summer.

You find a quiet place. You begin with prayer, “Lord, speak to me, your servant is listening.” Read it silently to yourself. You might pray again, “Lord, speak to me, your servant is listening.” This time, read the scripture aloud and see what word or phrase speaks to you. One final time pray, “Lord, speak to me, your servant is listening.” And this time read it silently, and I will underline those portions that speak to me and pray them – **“Thank you Lord, be my light and my salvation. Help me not to be afraid. Help me remember that with you at my side, there is no one of whom I should be afraid.”**

But there is one last thing I’d remind you of – one important strategy for overcoming our fear of the other – and that is found in the words of Jesus – it involves getting to know, and seeking to bless, the other.

Jesus said that we are to love our enemies. But often the other is not our enemy – or is only our enemy in our head. Most often Jesus simply says to love. Love, the scripture says, covers over a multitude of sins. Love converts enemies into friends. Often when we love, we find as the scripture says, **GRAPHIC: There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear.**

Which leads me to tell of something I’ve experienced and learned over the course of 35 years in law enforcement and ten years in ministry. I’ve been to a lot of places I was told to be afraid of, from the “Alps” of East Los Angeles, the streets of Compton and Inglewood, to even parts of Jerusalem and the Holy Land. The world is not nearly so dangerous as we fear. Choosing not to give in to fear, but faith, remembering that God is by our side, and that if God is by our side who do we need to fear, we begin to conquer our fear and live in faith as God has called us to live.

This takes us back to Jack Hanna and Africa – I love that Jesus is sometimes portrayed as a lion – not a tame lion – but a lion that comes alongside us as our protector. I saw an interesting photo online of an unlikely friendship – not a lion, but a cheetah and an impala – take a look. **GRAPHIC: PHOTO OF IMPALA AND CHEETAH.** That impala, if you could see the larger picture, is surrounded by other cheetahs who would gladly eat it – but it has been befriended by this one cheetah. **GRAPHIC: YOU’VE BEEN BEFRIENDED BY THE LION OF THE TRIBE OF JUDAH** – of whom will you be afraid?

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Scripture Reading for Sunday, January 22, 2017

Psalm 27:1

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?…

Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage;

wait for the Lord!

Matthew 5:43-44

“You have heard that it was said, you must love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

I John 4:18a and 19

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because God first loved us.