

“Dealing with Fear”

“In a peanuts cartoon strip **Charlie Brown goes to Lucy for a nickels worth of psychiatric help**. She proceeds to pinpoint his particular ‘fear’. Perhaps, she says, you have hypengyophobia, which is the fear of responsibility. Charlie Brown says no. Well, perhaps you have ailurophobia, which is the fear of cats. No. Well, maybe you have climacophobia, which is the fear of staircases. No. Exasperated, Lucy says well, maybe you have pantophobia, which is the fear of everything. Yes, says Charles, that is the one!” (<http://www.sermons.com>)

Haven’t we all been afraid of something or someone? It would be nice, wouldn’t it, if a nickel’s worth of Lucy’s help could resolve all of our fears! It isn’t very hard to understand why the disciples were afraid when they saw someone or something walking across the water during that dark and stormy night. Matthew reports, *“Between three and six o’clock in the morning Jesus came to the disciples, walking on the water. When they saw him walking on the water, they were terrified. ‘It’s a ghost!’ they said, and screamed with fear.”*

Peter Lockhart helps flesh out the insights today’s Scripture raises, especially on the topic of fear. He writes, “The story of Jesus walking on the water conveys much more potent messages than Jesus can do a cool miracle. There are messages about Jesus identity as divine, there are messages about how God holds back the deep and the waters to sustain creation and all life.

Yet whilst this power of God to uphold the creation is present the disciples are still cowering in the boat. The combination of sea and storm could be their undoing. Buying in to the imagery of the story, as Matthew tells it, the predicament of the disciples is a parable which speaks to all of us in the midst of life.”

Lockhart continues, “The deep, the waters, the storm are around us and even within us. The waters represent all of those things which confront us with our mortality and threaten our undoing.” Lockhart asks, **“What is the deep for you and for I?”** (“Jesus holds back the ‘deep’” by Peter Lockhart from his blogsite, *A different heresy*)

Not only was Jesus aware of the fear – of the terror of his disciples, he sought to comfort them and quell their fears! Matthew explained, *“Jesus spoke to them at once. ‘Courage!’ he said. ‘It is I. Don’t be afraid!’”* Clearly, Jesus was trying to calm down his disciples but let’s pause for a moment and consider the full circumstances they were experiencing. **First, Jesus spoke those words while he was still walking on the surface of the lake! Second, there were strong winds blowing, which meant they were experiencing a very bumpy ride and the waves were beginning to fill the boat with water!** To any outside observer, their boat could easily have sunk and they might have drowned. Knowing the mysterious figure on the water was Jesus did not necessarily mean he was going to save them from the consequences of a difficult storm on the lake. Such situations are both extremely confusing and very dangerous. Accepting it was Jesus, who was walking on the surface of the lake and assuming they somehow heard his words of comfort over the howl of the wind, he did not explicitly declare he would keep them safe from the stormy weather and the raging water. So, would you have been totally assured everything would be OK?

Beth Quick describes another frightful type of situation, which she witnessed, sharing, “I took part in a chaplaincy program at Crouse hospital, where one of my assigned units was the neonatal intensive care unit. There I watched babies born 1, 2, 3 months early, struggle for their lives, struggle to eat, to breathe, to gain even an ounce. **The mothers there, whether they considered themselves religious or not, suddenly found themselves having to rely on faith, suddenly found themselves believing in, hoping for, depending on miracles.** It was hard for an outsider, even a chaplain, to understand the kind of faith required in this special nursery.”

Quick explains, “At first I would look at some of the tiniest babies, some of the 1 lb. babies, and try to be realistic. To prepare myself for the grief I might experience, I tried to expect the real possibility that the smallest babies might not make it. I hoped for the best, but I tried to balance my hopes with realism, with the reality confronting me, so that I wouldn’t be disappointed if a miracle didn’t happen, so that I wouldn’t be hurt if I did have to confront sorrow and loss.” Quick continues, “But the mothers there would tell you that my attitude wasn’t what was needed there – they would tell you that no matter what the odds, they had to hope for a miracle, with all their heart, with all the faith they could muster. There was nothing practical about their faith, no consideration for realism in what they dreamed of happening.” Quick concludes, **“Perhaps this was the kind of faith Jesus was asking of Peter out on the sea that day. Unbounded faith, unrestrained, unmeasured, uncalculated. Perhaps this is the kind of faith Jesus is asking, demanding, expecting of us.”** (Beth Quick, *What Did You/do We Expect?*)

Returning to the scene in our Reading, immediately after Jesus identified himself and sought to comfort the disciples and while he was still walking on the water, Matthew addressed the topic of Peter’s faith when he reported, *“Then Peter spoke up. ‘Lord, if it is really you, order me to come out on the water to you.’”* Simon Peter was always the impetuous one! **He was the disciple, who spoke first and then thought about it afterwards.** The eldest disciple was testing Jesus, so if his teacher passed, then he obtained for himself the opportunity to also act miraculously!

Matthew described how Jesus gave Peter the opportunity he was seeking, as the gospel continues, *“‘Come!’ answered Jesus. So Peter got out of the boat and started walking on the water to Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he was afraid and started to sink down in the water. ‘Save me, Lord!’ he cried.”* Now, the fear all of the disciples felt when they saw something coming toward them on the waves of the raging waters was on the verge of fulfillment!

“At once Jesus reached out and grabbed hold of him and said, ‘What little faith you have!’” The proof of Jesus’ presence and authority had been demonstrated as Jesus continued to stand on the water the entire time! Jesus also asked, *“Why did you doubt?”*

Take a moment to ask yourself about your fears. What are they? Are your fears changing the way you want to or should be living your life? What is the impact on your relationships? Do your fears hinder how you relate with the most important persons in your life – and/or with God? What are the problems you aren’t dealing with because of your fear? **If your fear or fears are having such impacts upon you, then how can you face them and move forward?**

A story is told of how “One night a house caught fire and a young boy was forced to flee to the roof. The father stood on the ground below with outstretched arms, calling to his son, ‘Jump! I’ll catch you.’ He knew the boy had to jump to save his life. All the boy could see, however, was flame, smoke, and blackness. As can be imagined, he was afraid to leave the roof. His father kept yelling: ‘Jump! I will catch you.’ But the boy protested, ‘Daddy, I can’t see you.’ The father replied, ‘**But I can see you and that’s all that matters.**’” (Traditional Story)

All too often, we human beings feel trapped – unable to move through and beyond our difficulties and troubles. Our fears may for a time, at least, seem unsurmountable. Fear of the unknown is particularly crippling! However, if someone else, whom we trust, is present, even if unseen, then trusting their counsel and depending on their aid or help is, sometimes, what will enable us to overcome our fears and hardships! **The young boy heard his father’s voice, despite the smoke and fire. Peter had the presence of his Teacher – the Messiah, who had been walking on the turbulent waters!**

The Scripture continues, *“They both got into the boat, and the wind died down.”* Jesus clearly was in charge of Creation – the waters! *“Then the disciples in the boat worshiped Jesus. ‘Truly you are the Son of God!’ they exclaimed.”* Unfortunately, it would not be long before the disciples would allow their fears to lead them to side with his enemies when Jesus’ teachings attacked the Pharisees, the Teachers of the Law, and the Religious Elite. **Their fears would even cause them to run away when Jesus was arrested.**

You and I have the benefit of knowing the rest of the story of Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection! We also have our personal and corporate experiences of God’s Presence, Forgiveness, Support, and Guidance. **Opening ourselves to our Divine Parent’s Purpose and the New Relationship with God based on the Almighty’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial “Agape” Love, goes a long way toward empowering us to live out Faith – to overcome fear.** One component for the process of being open to God’s Purpose and the New Relationship with God is a frequent and deep prayer life. **Prayer can also enable us to serve God and the Almighty’s Purpose of reaching out to unchurched loved ones, friends, neighbors, and even acquaintances with the Divine Parent’s Gift of Faith, so they will be empowered to overcome fear.**

Raising the subject of praying for such a purpose, George Bullard asks, “What would happen if a congregation began praying earnestly that they would be sensitive to the opportunities God opens up for them to speak words of love and to develop relationships with pre-Christian, unchurched, underchurched, and dechurched persons? What would happen if a congregation developed support and accountability for people who feel led to proactively develop social and spiritual relationships with people outside the congregation and outside the Christian faith?”

Bullard begins to describe such a prayer focus, explaining, “Not confrontational evangelism that is focused more on success than the person. Not trying to see how many people can be ‘saved’ so evangelistic numbers will be high.” Encouraging a different prayer approach, Bullard says, **“Just a genuine unconditional love for people that emanates out of an authentic discipleship on the part of people caught up in an overly churched culture.”** (Overly churched culture congregations should change prayer focus by George Bullard)

Through today’s Scripture, you and I are invited to live the New Life in Christ, so we are enabled to endure and overcome our fears – to trust God’s Presence and Purpose – to be led by Faith and the Holy Spirit! Giving greater focus to Prayer both as individuals and as a Worshipping Congregation helps us grow in our ability to persevere over our fears. Opening ourselves to give greater focus on praying for those who are unchurched enables us to be better agents of God’s invitation to accept the Divine Parent’s Loving Forgiveness, the Gift of Faith, and to be victorious over our Fears. **Will we recommit ourselves to overcoming Fear by growing in our Faith and empowering it through Prayer?** How will you and I deal with Fear? **Take the Leap of Faith – Trust God to always be present and for you!** Amen.