

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, co-pastor

January 22, 2017
3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 4:12-23; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Do Not Live Afraid

Central to healthy human living is to live together. Our very nature has us as social creatures who find meaning, purpose, health and wholeness in community.

In the Garden of Eden story of creation as we find it in the book of Genesis, in the words of God, "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.'" (Gen. 2:18) At this point in the creation story, the solitary human is the only living creature so far in the midst of the Garden of Eden. So God goes on to create all the animals of the field, and birds of the air. But these are not enough for the relationship needed to make the human complete. It's not enough to have a cat or dog or bird in the household. God goes on then to create from the lone human a second human creature at which point gender enters the human story.

As in other places in the early chapters of Genesis, stories are told to explain the origins of the world and of life as we know it. And what we know about human life is that we are meant to be together, in relationships, in community, connected together with a social fabric.

One counter example in our world today is the matter of the use of solitary confinement in our criminal justice system. This form of punishment is increasingly being viewed as extreme and inhumane. Being placed in solitary confinement for more than a short time leads to psychological trauma that can have deep and lasting negative impacts. We human beings are incomplete and unhealthy unless we are connected and in community—in relationship.

As Jesus began his ministry, he knew that he needed companions in the tasks before him. He knew that for his own human health and wholeness he would be far more effective with a company of followers than he would be if he tried to go it alone.

We read Matthew's account of Jesus calling the first disciples to join him in the journey ahead. The 4 who are mentioned in the passage we read were all fishermen, those who were accustomed to toiling alone or in pairs as they went about their hard work. And yet the work to which Jesus was calling them was that they would now be interacting with people who would be the object of their catching attention. Because people require finesse in being persuaded, the disciples would be expected to enter into personal and conversational relationships that would lead to them following Jesus as well.

I think that sometimes we may think of those disciples of Jesus, at first, not being much more than an entourage accompanying this amazing preacher, teacher and miracle worker—not unlike the throngs of staff and secret service agents that accompany the President of the United States wherever he goes.

But the disciples of Jesus were much more than window dressing. They were much more than aides and associates. They were companions of Jesus who were in relationship with Jesus and with each other. They, like all healthy human beings, needed each other. Jesus needed the companionship, the relationships, the community, because let's remember that Jesus was fully human and also fully divine.

Knowing of this fundamental need for interpersonal connection, it is puzzling then why so much human time is spent in dividing, separating, distinguishing, and grouping people. This demarcating can easily and quickly lead to the vilifying of one another—one group or category looking down upon another. This can go so far that fear enters and infects the wrangling and further raises the tension.

When this happens, divisions can begin to threaten safety and security. Fear-based partitions become more challenging than ever to overcome. When fear is fostered, we can find ourselves in very dark places.

This human reality of division and separation can be found in almost every aspect of our human lives—including within the church itself. The church after all, is made up of human beings, warts and all, so can often find itself experiencing conflict, division and disunity.

We know from what's contained in his letters that the church in Corinth—one of the many churches that was established by the apostle Paul—was a church in trouble and in need of rebooting. In this opening chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul is expressing concern that the reports he's receiving are indicating that the church there is divided. It has split into factions that each claim to be in the right with the implication that others who disagree are in the wrong. This squabbling has denied the unity of Christ's church in that place.

Paul declares, "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you are united in the same mind and the same purpose." (1 Cor. 1:10) He then goes on to berate them for the growing disunity in the church there. He suggests that they have given into a divisive spirit, one that would have them seeing those with whom they are not in full agreement to be made to be inferior—and perhaps even to be feared. Paul is calling them to rise above this division and to be reunited under the lordship of Jesus rather than risk falling into lives of fear and division. It's almost as if Paul is telling the Corinthian Christians (and us), do not live afraid.

Do Not Live Afraid is the title of a book by United Church of Christ pastor John Indermark. (© 2009 by John Indermark, Upper Room Books). It's the basis for our adult Sunday school class this winter.

Indermark writes "Fear is a great motivator, but it is not a saving one. Fear can generate many things, but it cannot generate the gospel's core: love. First John 4:18 is not engaging in sophistry when it says, 'There is no fear in love.' It is telling the truth about Christian discipleship. It is telling the truth to purveyors and provocateurs of fear, whether inside or outside the church. Fear relies on the threat of death in relationship, spirit, or body. The gospel of Jesus Christ relies on fear's nullification: God's gracious promise of life." (*ibid.* p. 11)

In our day, we as the people of God, followers of Christ, are called to 2 important tasks as we witness to our faith in world. First, we must be reminded and remind our fellow Christians again and again that we are a people of life in the Spirit. When we find ourselves surrounded by seemingly looming darkness, we must not give into the fear that accompanies it. We must rise above the divisions that it attempts to create. We must look beyond the walls of fear and separation that are rising, both figuratively and more concretely. We're to remember and to remind each other that Jesus is the Christ for all who call on him. One of the most amazing truths of our faith is the truth that Jesus is for everyone without distinction, without merit, without favor and position. As Paul declares to the Galatian Christians, he declares loudly and clearly to us as well. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:27-28) Can we say it too much that all of you are one in Christ Jesus? I think not. All of you (all of us) are one in Christ Jesus.

This, of course, is what Paul was saying to the Corinthian Christians as well when he was decrying their divisions over seemingly meaningless distinctions—"that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose." (1 Cor. 1:10b)

The second task to which we're called in our day is to stand up to those purveyors and provocateurs of fear, as Indermark calls them. Purveyors and provocateurs of fear—it has an ominous sound to it. And ominous it is when there are those in our midst who from positions of persuasion become purveyors and provocateurs of fear.

The word purveyor, by the way, comes from the world of business and commerce. A purveyor is one who supplies something as a matter of business. A purveyor of fear is one who has mastered the spreading and distributing of fear in a way that brings around some sort of reward or compensation. Those who purvey fear do so for a reason.

And then how about that word provocateur as in provocateur of fear? According to one dictionary a provocateur is "a person who provokes trouble, causes dissension, or the like; [an] agitator." (www.dictionary.com) A provocateur of fear then is one who uses fear to provoke trouble and cause dissension.

As people of Christian faith that leads us to live in hope, we must stand and resist and counteract those in our circles today who are insidiously working to obscure and undermine that hope with fear. We are not people of fear. We are people of hope. We are not people of doom and gloom. We are people of hope.

Indermark goes on to say, "With remarkable frequency, the first word God speaks to individuals and groups poised at the edge of momentous decision or holy encounter is this: 'Do not be afraid. Do not fear.' What is intended goes beyond an attitude adjustment on our part. What is intended are lives empowered by that decisive word, so that 'do not be afraid' finds its fullest expression when we do not live afraid. Faith does not call us merely to live without fear inside the sanctuary. Discipleship call us to confront appeals to fear in the world around us and to live our lives and bear our witness accordingly." (*ibid.* p. 11)

Do not be afraid.

Do not fear.

Do not live afraid.

My friends, those are our marching orders.

We're about to sing a hymn of Christian unity that "was written in 1966 while the author [Peter Scholtes] was a Catholic parish priest at St. Brendan's on the South Side of Chicago. At the time he was leading a youth choir that met in the church basement and was looking for something appropriate for them to sing at a series of ecumenical and interracial events. When he couldn't find such a song, he wrote this one in a single day. It became immensely popular and is often described as 'the anthem of the Jesus Movement.'" (*Glory to God: A Companion*, Carl P. Daw Jr., Westminster John Knox Press, 2016, p. 303)

In the unity to which Christ calls us, do not be afraid, do not fear, do not live afraid, and do stand, as you're able, and sing #300, "We are one in the Spirit."