

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world.¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.

The danger of living and acting out of a place of fear is a pretty important theme throughout Scripture. It shows up at the beginning of the story of maybe the most seminal event of the Old Testament, God delivering the people from slavery in Egypt.

The book of Exodus that tells this story begins by saying, “A new king came to power in Egypt who didn’t know Joseph.” The Hebrew people had first come to Egypt in search of food and there they re-united with their brother Joseph who had risen to power as Pharaoh’s right hand man, and as the one who had saved Egypt from the famine. For years, the descendants of Joseph, the Israelites, had lived side by side with the Egyptians. Both had flourished. And the Israelites and Egyptians lived in peace together. But then a new king, a new Pharaoh emerged and the Exodus writer wants us to know two things about him: he had forgotten all that God had done through Joseph, and he was afraid of how numerous the Hebrew people had become.

Forgetfulness and fear can be a deadly combination. We might even say, as many have, that the opposite of love is not hate but rather fear, and that hatred is the most extreme form of fear.

I’ll say that again, “The opposite of love is not hate, but fear, and hatred is the most extreme form of fear.”

Fear, especially fear of those deemed other, can allow us to justify all sorts of things in the name of safety and protection. Fear can lead to dehumanization and dehumanization can lead to atrocities. For Pharaoh, his fear first led him to enslave the Hebrew people and then to order the murder of every male baby born to the Hebrews.

Fear of the other and forgetfulness of God is a deadly combination.

As I said, the Biblical writers understood the danger of living out of fear well, perhaps articulated most eloquently in our Scripture this morning, “There is no fear in love but perfect love casts out fear.” Beyond this Scripture, the phrase, “Do Not be Afraid” is written 365 times in the Bible. And while I don’t believe that God was somehow divinely orchestrating to have that phrase in the Bible the exact same number of times as the days of the year, we could do a lot worse than to remind ourselves every single day to live out of love and not out of fear.

But that’s easier said than done, right. Because, frankly, there is a lot of scary stuff out there.

We are scared about the impact of climate change.

We are scared about the future of democracy.

We are scared about wars all over the world that have no end in sight.

Or our fears may be more local.

We are scared about our kids being ok when we know so many are struggling with mental health challenges.

We are scared that we'll never be able to have enough money to afford a home or to get ahead.

We are scared that we won't be up to the task of caring for loved ones who need a lot of care.

And I could go on and on. All of these are things that legitimately make us scared. Living out of love and not fear does not mean we live naively. It doesn't mean that we just try to pretend like things aren't as bad as they seem. It doesn't mean we ignore the very real causes for fear in the world, in our communities, and in our lives.

But I think what it does mean is that even when things feel scary, we choose to live out of the reality of love anyway. This is the same sentiment expressed in a poem that Mother Teresa hung on her wall:

People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered; forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives; be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies; succeed anyway.

If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you; be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight; build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, there may be jealousy; be happy anyway.

The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow; do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough; give the world the best you've got anyway.

I think this is the unwritten sentiment behind the words of the writer of 1 John. While it is not the same author as the person who wrote the gospel of John, the letter does come from the same tradition within early Christianity and the style of the writer's discourse on love is almost the exact same as Jesus' style in his farewell discourse to the disciples, the discourse where he says, "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you." And also where he says, "By your love, all people will know you are my disciples." The writer intends for his reader to remember these words of Jesus, and it's important to remember the context in which Jesus said them.

This was the night he would be arrested. The next day he would be killed. The gospel of John wants us to know that Jesus knew exactly what was coming. He wants us to know that Jesus is not naïve.

Jesus is going to be arrested. Jesus is going to be killed.

And knowing, all this, his last words to the disciples – and by extension to us – is to love anyway.

When the worst happens, when the thing we fear the most happens, love anyway.

And that was true not only for Jesus but to this early Christian community that first received this letter. They were persecuted. Some became martyrs. And even when they weren't, they were mocked and derided by the society around them. And in this context, the writer tells them, "love casts out fear." You see, it's not that they weren't worried or scared about what was happening or what might happen, rather they wouldn't let the things they feared make them turn away from love. They refused to dehumanize those they feared. They refused to allow their fear to justify seeking revenge against those who had dehumanized them. They put an end to the cycle of fear leading to dehumanization and dehumanization leading to harm. That's what the writer means by letting love cast out fear. That's what Jesus did when he forgave those who killed him. That's what the early Christians did when they prayed for those who persecuted them.

At First Congregational, we have a small group called the midlife men's meet-up. It's a place for men in the middle part of life – middle age -- to get together just to share what's going on – joys and struggles – and to support each other. At the meeting this week, I mentioned that it feels like we're living through a generational crisis almost all the time.

And someone – whose a little further into mid-life than I am – reminded me that it's kind of always been like that. More often than not, the world has often felt like it was teetering, the future seemed uncertain, and fear was knocking at the door.

It was an important reminder that while the specifics of what is happening in the world right now may be unique, the sense that things are not ok is not. That's how it's always been.

Whether we're talking about a generation ago or 2000 years ago when our Scripture was written or anytime in between.

And the good news is that there have always been people who have looked at the state of the world with all of it's uncertainties, with all of the pain, with all of the just god-awful stuff that happens and have decided to love anyway.

In 1955, one of the most horrific acts of racial terrorism in our country happened when Emmett Till was brutally murdered, his body maimed beyond recognition. His mother, Mamie Mobley chose to leave his casket open for the world to see what had been done to her son. She wanted to expose the evil, but, amazingly, she was able to do that without letting the evil consume her.

She was asked if she harbored hatred against the two white men who brutally murdered her son and this is what she said, “It certainly would be unnatural not to hate them, yet I’d have to say that I’m unnatural. The Lord gave me a shield I don’t know how to describe it myself...I did not wish them dead. I did not wish them in jail. If I had to, I could take their four little children – they each had two – and I could raise those children as if they were my own and I could have loved them.”

Friends, living out of love doesn’t protect us from the things we fear, but it does protect us from letting the fear consume us. So hear, once again, the words of our Scripture:

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.

May it be so for each of us. May it be so for our churches. May it be so for our world. Amen