

Nov. 6, 2016 “Facing Our Fear as we Live in Love”  
I John 4: 16-21 Matthew 25:14-30  
First United Church of Arvada  
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“Perfect love casts out fear.” What feelings come to you as you listen to these powerful words? “Perfect love casts out fear.” Does it bring immediate peace and comfort or perhaps, like me, a bit of uneasiness? It may seem strange, but as a minister and a woman often challenged by my fears for the future of my family, church, country, and even the earth itself, these words, “Perfect love casts out fear” invoke a little shame. I wonder if my frequent fear might suggest my weak faith or inadequate love.

There are many sermons that could be preached on the Gospel passage for today—“Jesus’ parable of the Gold Coins.” Certainly, the story is about wise and prudent stewardship of that which has been entrusted to us. At this time of the year, as our stewardship board guides us in our financial giving to the church, this story can inspire our commitment to support our church’s ministry and future. But of course, the gold coins symbolize more than just money. Other translations of this story use the term “talents” instead of the word “coins.” In the story, all the servants but one understood what it meant to be good stewards. They invested what they had been given, and doubled its value. Only one servant failed his master. Why? In fear of the unpredictability of what was to come, this servant dug a hole and buried his one coin. When the master returned the other servants were praised as good and trustworthy, but though this man dutifully returned his coin to his master, he was declared worthless and turned away. As a child hearing this story, it sounded harsh to me and I was upset by the master’s seemingly insensitive declaration. “For all those who have, more will be given, and they will have abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” I had already seen poverty up close, growing up in a poor rural community, where my father was as a family doctor, serving families that never had adequate funds for living and suffered the limitations and indignities of their poverty, year after year and generation after generation.

But I had read other stories of Jesus' love and knew that he wouldn't suddenly, from one story to the next become cruel and unfeeling. I trusted that there was more to this story that I didn't yet understand it. The literal perspective of my childhood eventually grew into deeper understandings of symbolic meanings—of spiritual truth. Now as I read this same story one line stands out. It seems to be the fulcrum on which the story turns. The servant offers a feeble explanation for his behavior. **“I was afraid.”** Why did he act as he did? **“I was afraid.”** Understandable? Sure. Acceptable? Not really. Living in fear is an affront to our faith. Inaction based on fear, is sin. We all do it, but these are not our shining moments. Fear ignores the promises of the Gospel. “Perfect love casts out fear.”

The forces that confront us in the chaos of our modern world have created an atmosphere of pervasive distrust. These forces are large and confusing and often malevolent and we feel vulnerable in the face of them and powerless to confront them--The violence against innocent people in the streets and schools and theaters and churches, the complexity of technology and its profoundly confusing impact on human life, the vitriolic public rhetoric that has become strangely acceptable in racial slurs, insulting remarks about women, lack of concern, even disdain, for the impoverished, lack of trust in our fellow men and women. We respond to our fear by becoming glued to the coverage of the stories that provoke it. We watch devastating natural disasters-- hurricanes and floods, droughts and fires--made more lethal and destructive by global warming. We endure month after month of lies and intensely mean spirited political campaigning. We witness the growing enmity between law enforcement and the neighborhoods they serve and the fierce anger and rage of crowds who feel that they have too little control over their own lives. We see refugees streaming helplessly out of war torn countries.

In our fear, we can become obsessed with our personal security, and seek to bolster it despite what this might mean to our suffering neighbor. After a particularly scary or disturbing news-story we find ourselves living with a sort of smoldering dread that puts a

dark cloud over all of the experiences of the day. Soon either consciously or unconsciously and bit by bit, fear can begin its characteristic activity, shutting us down. If we aren't to slip into painful anxiety, numbness seems the best defense. Traumatized by fearful fantasies beyond our capacity to cope and desperate to pretend that we are okay, not touched by the fear around us, we may have a sudden impulse to simply check out—to hole up, to go shopping—to tighten up and decide to just take care of number one. Collectively, we put guards in airports and schools, buoy up our police and health departments, install more video cameras, build walls and develop a paranoia about the hidden villains who live among us. When fear takes over our life, it begins to steal our soul from our body. When fear enters the body it constricts the spirit and over time destroys the human capacity for thoughtful creative, heartfelt and compassionate engagement with the world. Fear causes us to develop armor and to lose contact with our inner selves, our connections with others, and with our God. We close down, we shut up, we hide.

In my study of history, I have always be baffled by and appalled at how the civilized and basically good people of Germany once brought a monstor like Hitler to power and allowed him to control the lives and deaths of so many. I grew up with this as an example of a people so traumatized by fear that they began lying to themselves and believing their own lies in order to cope. They become “false selves.” In Hitler’s Germany, even the church was full of traumatized souls who did “too little too late” to stop the contagiousness of the evil. Fear it seems can be an alien presence. It isn’t only “my fear alone.” You or I didn’t create it out of thin air. It does not belong only to you or to me, although our reactions to it might make it seem like ours. It has a force of its own.

Robert Sardello, in his book, *Freeing the Soul From Fear*, refers to fear as a “shape shifter.” Often, when we think we have freed ourselves from fear, it shows up in the very approaches we are using to control it. The nuclear weapons produced to make the world, “safe for democracy,” have, in their unimaginable power, themselves, become a

tremendous source of modern fear. The weapons we manufacture and sell around the world are often used to perpetuate the violence among other nations and peoples.

So what is the antidote to this spread of fear that isolates and separates us from each other? At the risk of sounding sentimental or simplistic, I will start with an answer, which, I may add, I believe I have on good authority, “Perfect love casts out fear.” Love is the only healer. God is love and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”

Ah, finally, some respite. We can close our eyes and rest in these comforting words. All we have to do is get closer to God. But here is the rub. Love doesn’t allow us to run away from the problems of this world but rather plunges us deeply into its pathetic suffering heart. Through out the Gospels, Jesus’s great love did not protect him from suffering deeply. In his book, *Writing in the Sand*, Thomas Moore writes, “Jesus goes as deep into his suffering as he reaches high in his spirituality. The depth of his emotion gives human grounding to his godlike vision. Both together make him a model of compassion and responsiveness.” Love won’t protect any of us from suffering or keep us safe and alive. We cannot run away from our fear, not even to God. It is this final realization of the inescapability of our fear that is the beginning of healing. Fear can not be out-run for it will ultimately catch up with us. When we realize this, and face it, our confidence in our own humanity increases and our capacity to love others grows.

The Episcopal Priest and author, Matthew Fox, once told a story about a school board in New Hampshire which had been taken over by Christian Fundamentalists. He related how, their decree, “Henceforth in the school system no public school teacher is allowed to use the word, ‘imagination,’ in the classroom...” “Satan is (found) in the imagination.” Fox reasoned, “Well, of course, Satan is there, but God is there too. Everything is in the imagination. That’s what makes it so wonderful. You have to choose. It comes from the inside.” Here is a clear example of fear as a shape shifter.

Though we have some sympathy with the fear that Christianity is losing ground as an influence in our society and in the lives of the children, a desperate attempt to control behaviors—to shut people up—is simply more “fear” shape shifted into a different form.

Fear is a force of division—separating us from others and from ourselves. Love is a force of connection giving us the motivation to begin the lifelong challenge of wrestling with our fear. It is an individual challenge but its healing power guided by love’s larger force can have an effect on a whole society. If we don’t take a step back and look at our fears we run the risk of so identifying with them that we live them out unconsciously in our day to day lives. Our fears become us. We are justified by them. We develop a false self, that invisibly controls us.

Fear destroys our human capacity for imaginative engagement with the world. Without imagination, love easily becomes only shallow sentimentality. We express loving sentiments in church on Sunday but somehow they seem to fade when we try to take them into the challenges of our weekday worlds. We must bring the prayerful patience of the imagination into our lives to seek the depth of our love. Right about now I am thinking, “Wow, Karin, are you really claiming to know and speak about the true nature of love---A task that has challenged the greatest theologians, philosophers, poets and artists throughout time? O.K., no. But I am, humbly I hope, going to conclude today by listing six things I believe about love.

1. Love, doesn’t belong to us, to you or me., it flows from a sacred source into the world. Our work is simply to become a vessel through which it can flow.
2. Love opens us up to the mystery of another. This makes stereotyping, racism and other bigotry impossible.
3. When love touches us, our whole presence changes. It becomes a creative force through which we can imagine new ways of thinking, working, and relating to each other.
4. Love carries with it its own difficulties. It hurts, it confuses and it keeps us awake at night. It will not let go. So, if what you are experiencing is too easy, well, its probably not love.
5. Love insists that even in our surrender to it, we not lose ourselves. Even as vessels for love we must continue to be and value our individual selves.
6. When we love another, not out of our own need, but really seeing and valuing them we release love into the world around us.

Now, you write the rest. The simple pondering of our love is itself a loving act. When we begin to imagine this quality of love in the world we experience the world as a sacred place. In this unfair, scary, angry, disappointing place we begin to see the invisible behind the visible. The spiritual term for this is “intent.” It means that something held in thought has become so real as to be literally present. Don’t mistake, this is not the same as refusing to see what is really there, a world in serious trouble. It’s rather being truly able, through the power of our love, to *imagine* it to be different. And through our imagining, the world has already begun to change, and so have we.