

I believe that the following quotation sums up quite relevantly what by sun and moon transpires in our social and political spheres (especially the latter); but thankfully, it also offers a more eloquent backdrop to this sermon than anything three cups of coffee and a Boston Crème donut would have produced from my rather weary freshly-returned-from-California-and-immediately-enrolled-into-Hebrew101 mind.

“Within a system which denies the existence of basic human rights, fear tends to be the order of the day. Fear of imprisonment, fear of torture, fear of death, fear of losing friends, family, property or means of livelihood, fear of poverty, fear of isolation, fear of failure [all of these]. A most insidious form of fear is that which masquerades as common sense or even wisdom, condemning as foolish, reckless, insignificant or futile the small, daily acts of courage which help to preserve man’s self-respect and inherent human dignity. It is not easy for a people conditioned by fear under the iron rule of the principle that might is right, to free themselves from the enervating miasma of fear. Even under the most crushing state machinery, courage rises up again and again, for fear is not the natural state of civilized man.” -- Aung San Suu Kyi, 1990, Freedom from Fear.

Now drawing the unfortunate parallel: in our lectionary text from Jeremiah here we have God, the author of all systems -- the creator of the natural state of Adam (which in Hebrew literally means: man/mankind) -- employing fear as a means to condemn and condition one’s behavior... “Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation that I will break down and destroy it; Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings (Jer. 18:6-7, 11)”... or else...

Could it really be then that this entity we’re here to worship this morning operates no differently than the systems of control and dictatorships of fear as outlined in our initial quotation? Are those Westboro Baptists right after all? Should we feel more afraid of God than loved; should anxiety rather than peace govern our spirituality and dictate the choices that we make? Ought the fear of God’s wrath really trump our trust in divine hope and grace? And should that fear so determine our daily acts such that at every attempt we make to be imaginative in the expression of our humanity we are instead rendered nervous-nellies, afraid that at our first slip-up we will be crushed by the divine hand which holds us, apparently, so delicately? *If that is not the allusion, what then is going on here, Jeremiah? And why don’t your words match the happy overtones of that hymn we sing about the potter’s clay?*

Well it seems that the reason why God is so hot and bothered is because the people have disobeyed or altogether disregarded the Sabbath laws. The Sabbath laws you may or may not remember dictated that from sunset to sunset obedient Jews were not to work; that they were to stay in one place and specifically, to stay at home. If they absolutely had to travel or step outside, there were to take no long walks and they were not to carry heavy loads along said short walk. There was also to be no gardening or anything for that matter that could be conceived of as laboring. Yes, this even meant there was to be no worship. Thus, the true Sabbath mandated that you would work and serve right by God for 6 days just as God served right by the world in creation, and that on the seventh day and that day only, you were to rest and rest only.

If then somewhere in the cosmic Heavens, God and the archangels are still abiding by these ancient laws, boy, should we then be rightly afraid. For even if we were to substitute the orthodox undertones with the gentile understanding of the Sabbath as Sunday (today), who amongst us actually does nothing on this day but rest? Who doesn’t take a whacker to the weed, a list to the market, a child to the game, a hand to the document? Heck, it’s hard enough to get us through these doors to worship (also a no-no), could you imagine being forced to actually do nothing at all? Moreover, could you imagine God whispering in the ear of his celestial prophets about our imminent destruction, all because we were found to be cheering on little Lucy, or searching for the ripest mango, or planting some basil, or even, working to make a living?

Personally, I’d rather not imagine or believe in such a characteristic of God, but here I am nevertheless contradicted by the inspiration of scripture! Is there then something I’m missing in Jeremiah? Could the potential wrath of God, or fear in general for that matter, be construed as a positive, a teaching moment guiding us toward a safer, more healthy and righteous way of life?

Some have offered a resounding ‘yes’ to this question. Saying, after all, it is fear of the flame that retreats your hand; fear of the accident that buckles your helmet; fear of the death that tells you, hey stupid, you probably shouldn’t jump into the shark tank. It is fear that alerts you to harm; that protects your limbs; that procures your survival. And without its sense, we wouldn’t have evolved past the first caves we slept in.

Certainly none of us can argue against the virtues of these primal fears. But must we also stand alongside those who say that fear is the preeminent motivator behind more efficient workers, brighter students, better athletes, nicer kids, quicker recoveries, stronger believers, etc.? Is it really fear, a negative reinforcement, rather than the positive attractions of ambition, love, or hope that encourages us to work harder for a better life; to study more for a better grade and subsequently an opportunity at a better school or job; to practice at greater length to master a skill; to be more respectful to our parents; to struggle with more determination to beat a damning diagnosis; or to walk more faithfully in the ways of our Lord? It’s really fear, most of all, that propels us through, toward and in all of that?

It seems from the reports and studies I've read, too numerous, self-evident, and dull worth name dropping, that fear can certainly help to get the ball rolling so to speak (to inspire longer work hours so not to be one of the first cutbacks etc.), but that its helpful burst is so short lived that the energy/rewards immediately gained quickly dissipate in the long run, rendering it rather inadequate of a tool. More importantly however, the stress induced from being afraid will more than certainly shorten one's lifespan, not to mention contribute to a greater occurrence of physical and mental complications, which naturally can only be construed as results that are anything but positive in nature.

Equally to the point but somewhat tangential I admit, when asked about what surprises him most about humanity, Gandhi answered: "Man. Because he sacrifices his health in order to make money. Then he sacrifices money to recuperate his health. And then he is so anxious about the future that he does not enjoy the present; the result being that he does not live in the present or the future; he lives as if he is never going to die, and then dies having never really lived."

And I say, spot on Gandhi, but as I'm reminding myself that this is a Christian house of worship, let us finally look to our New Testament lesson and see how Christ corrects this old notion that fear somehow gives way to a greater call to faithfulness and overall state of well-being.

Hmm... This is Jesus, right, the Christ, talking here in Luke 14? Yeshua ben Yosef? The Sacrificial Lamb, Prince of Peace, King of Kings? Um, well this is not exactly a correction of that old notion of fear-mongering, this is more like a confirmation of it! What's going on here? Jesus is saying that I should hate my wife, my mother, my father, my children, and even life itself? Moreover, unless I give up all of my possessions and leave everything I have ever known and love behind I can't be his disciple? This is not exactly encouraging, especially when coupled with that other troubling teaching several chapters later about a rich man, a camel's needle and heaven. In fact, it seems that unless I devalue everything in my life that previously had meaning, and until I only have eyes for Jesus, not only will he turn his back on me (indeed, a passive form of divine wrath), but he'll also block me from eternal salvation. Yikes!

Taken literally at his word, Jesus here is rather like a parent's worst nightmare, isn't he? He's kind of, actually, like a possessive boyfriend: threats of leaving if an exclusivity of time together is not achieved; a disregarding and devaluing of everything and everyone that matters outside of him, etc.

Well thankfully, Jesus is not our boyfriend nor is he here supposed to be taken literally. After all, this is a parable, coming from the Greek παραβολή, which is not a literal teaching but a moral teaching by analogy and comparison. Considering this, I really don't think Jesus is saying we ought to go forward today as bachelors, bachelorettes, paupers and pauperettes. Rather, it's a more about a state of mind, not very much unlike that somewhat famous phrase by Jarod Kintz: "Nothing, Everything, Anything, Something: If you have nothing, then you have everything, because you have the freedom to do anything, without the fear of losing something."

And I must say that is certainly a positive note and one well worth ending on this morning. But it doesn't very much answer our dilemma which posits both the Father and the Son advocating for fear as the principle motivation for becoming their followers. After all, analogy/comparison or not, Jesus is still saying that we must only consider him and nothing else, for if we look to those something else's, then we'll miss out on the Prize which puts all mortal prizes in their place.

So what then are we to do? Are we really to embrace this fear of God? Should we really live our lives always afraid of the possibility that God is ready to close the hand which holds us, crushing us at the first sign that we sin and/or choose our own path?

Amen.

Deuteronomy 31:6 *Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the*

*Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you.*

2 Corinthians 12:9 *But he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you*