

The Love that Casts Out Fear
John 15:1-8, I John 4:7-21
Cindy Jarvis, April 28, 2024

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

We begin, this morning, with the annual Chapman Survey of American Fears. Founded in 2013, this survey’s current principal investigator is a sociologist who teaches at Chapman University named Christopher Bader. As PI, Bader asks randomly chosen adults about dozens of topics: “nuclear war, pollution, volcanic eruptions and [of course] zombies, then ranks the terrors in order of prevalence.” Not coincidentally, Bader also studies religion and conspiracy theories. *Hold that thought.* Since the survey’s inception, the top fear of Americans has remained the same. Sixty percent of those surveyed last October said they were most afraid of corrupt government officials. It is a fear voiced by respondents of every political predilection. Then in no particular order, additional fears included fear of financial collapse, Russia using nuclear weapons, the US getting involved in a world war, people I love becoming seriously ill or dying, pollution, biological warfare, cyberterrorism and not having enough money in the future.

“Do you have a theory [about fear]?” Bader’s NYT interlocutor asked. “I’ve always found that fears stem from uncertainty,” Bader responds. “In times of societal change—great changes in how the economy is going to work...; big events like terrorist attacks—all of these events create uncertainty in the sense that you don’t know what your world is going to be like in a year.” Presently, he adds, our uncertainty is magnified by what I would call the disparate voices that narrate our no-longer common life. “The media gives us what we want,” Bader says, “something to fear, the scary thing, the dark thing. That’s what’s going to attract our attention.” So far, I’m with him.

With him, that is, until Bader pivots to the connection between fear and what he calls the erosion of religious beliefs. “What religion can provide is certainty,” he declares, to my horror (and Craig’s last Sunday). He then goes on to say, “The Bible is a rule book: Here’s what’s right, here’s what’s wrong, here’s how you get to heaven, here’s how you get to hell. It provides you with a sense of certainty. When you lose that, on a societal level, it can have a big effect, causing us to be afraid.”

My first response was, “This guy is teaching religion?” My second response was, well, not sayable in a pulpit. My third response was to open Bader’s so-called rule book to the First Letter of John, a letter that majors in faith rather than certainty, a letter that leads with love rather than rules, and, in the end, a letter that invites us to love one another.

While John’s theory about fear acknowledges his readers’ uncertainty about the future, he traces the origin of fear to guilt about the past. “Fear,” he wrote, “has to do with punishment.” Scholars guess he was writing at a time when the Last Judgment loomed large in the imaginations of early Christians, a fear that I am guessing is not high on your list. Still, if you have lived long enough, you know what it is to toss and turn at night about the consequences of what you have done or left undone: choices that have caused relationships to be broken, commitments to be betrayed, trust to be lost, communities to be divided. Actions that have led to consequences you never anticipated and now cannot undo. Words said that, once said, cannot be unheard. [If none of that rings a bell in your experience, you might google “narcissistic personality disorder” when you get home.] In all of these cases, the fear of punishment is not so much a future threat as a present, self-inflicted reality whose origin is *guilt about a past we cannot change*. For sure, this is something we live with personally as individuals. But it is also a fear we are presently experiencing collectively as a nation.

What to do? Time does not permit a deep dive into all of the ways we devise to cast out fear by ourselves, but to name just two: we rewrite the past to absolve ourselves and gaslight those who beg to differ with our revisionist version of history; and/or we blame simply everyone else for the mess we have made of our lives and theirs, thereby exchanging guilt directed at ourselves for anger directed at others. Fear, guilt and anger tend to function as a trinity in our minds, such that where one is, the other two are lurking.

Inevitably, when *our* ill-conceived attempts to cast out fear fail, Bader's take on religion steps in to offer an assist. Theologian Robert Jenson characterizes the God of this religion as the God of the Past "...[who] rules in our lives as he guarantees our securities and assigns our guilt; he is the heavenly Watchmaker,...the super-Bookkeeper who will let us 'into heaven; if only we do our best and are sincerely sorry and try harder from now on.'" Through the lens of this God's spectacles, the Bible is read as a compendium of rules. Through the mouth of this God, God's word usually sounds something like: "If you do thus and so, then blessings or curses will follow." Again, says Jens, "Such an utterance indeed poses a possible future [even a certain future], but also binds it to a prior condition, binds it, that is, to a past." Far from casting out fear, the God of the Past and that God's champions magnify our fear of judgment to motivate a certain kind of human obedience and obeisance.

Who, then, is this other God John is writing about? John says simply, "God is love," a love that came to dwell with us, abide with us, accompany us. Yet it was the angels in the night sky over Bethlehem who knew enough of this love coming toward us to say to the shepherds "Fear not!" because the love that came down at Christmas "is not so much the name of a personality trait as shorthand for a narrative: death and resurrection," [says Jens.] I think that is why Karl Barth famously observed that, "It is only here [where love comes toward us]—with all due respect to our fear of life—that it is really worthwhile to be afraid. Here hearts and reins are tried. Here the question is awe and not agitation. Here no one can escape and no one can console himself. Having reached the ultimate limit of all that we fear, where God is revealed to us, we are no longer afraid of this or the next thing, but of God alone."

The nearest analogy might be, as some of you can testify, the experience of a total eclipse. "The deepest, and most terrifying [thing I remembered, Annie Dillard writes] was this: I have said that I heard screams....People on all the hillsides, including, I think, myself, screamed when the black body of the moon detached from the sky and rolled over the sun. But something else was happening at the same instant....The second before the sun went out we saw a wall of dark shadow come speeding at us. We no sooner saw it than it was upon us, like thunder. It rolled up the valley. It slammed our hill and knocked us out....It was as though an enormous, loping god in the sky had reached down and slapped the earth's face."

I imagine the revelation of God's love on that silent night was the reverse, was a blinding light entering the world's darkness, casting out our litany of fears in favor of the one worthwhile fear, fear of the living God coming toward us, reaching down as if to hold the whole world in God's hand. (Mark Anderson's introduction to *Let All Moral Flesh Keep Silence* on Christmas Eve, comes to mind!) But more. Imagine entering this sanctuary every Sunday, a bundle of fears on your mind and hearing, as if for the first time, that God is on the way to abide with you. Imagine hearing and actually believing, "If a person is in Christ, that one becomes a new person all together—the past is finished and gone, everything has become new." Death and resurrection. Imagine agitation giving way to awe as you bow down before the love that is, even now, casting out your fear.

John continues. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." John is saying that because God cannot bear the distance we keep from the love for which we were made, God takes the initiative, Love comes to

us, God loves us precisely when we are still holding on for dear life to the mess we have made of our lives. God comes not on the basis of who we are *or who we have been* but who God is. Unlike most everybody and everything in the world who “loves” you in a transactional way, loves you because of what you can do or be for them, or loves you in a conditional way because you have been a good girl or boy and deserve it, the love that God is, is a forgiving love, an unconditional love, a love that never gives up on us.

The effect of being loved in this way? Death and resurrection. I am remembering the story told by a judge in a Brooklyn courtroom of a kid convicted of gunning down another kid execution style. “When the jury returned a verdict of guilty, it seems as if his deadly gaze only increased in intensity,” the judge reported. But on the day of sentencing, the murdered child’s mother addressed the court. “Looking into his hateful stare, the mother began to speak in muted tones. There was no primal call for revenge or retribution. Instead her message was distilled by days of endless grief. ‘I have no bad feelings,’ she said. ‘I could never hate you.’ For the first time since the trial began, the defendant’s eyes lost their laser force and appeared to surrender to a life force that only a mother can generate: nurturing, unconditional love....His head was hanging low. There was no more swagger, no more stare. The destructive and evil forces within him collapsed helpless before this remarkable display of humanness,” Before this disarming witness, I would say, to the mercy and forgiveness and love that casts out fear.

Finally, John writes, “Beloved, since God loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another.” It seems to me, more than any other time in my life, we are being led, day by day, not to love one another but to fear one another, with the sort of fear that too often leads to hatred. “Hatred gums things up,” Princeton Professor Eddie Glaude Jr. said last Monday night at Green Street Friends School. “From the beginning, this has been so. It blocks the way toward others. It straitjackets the imagination and places us behind bars.” But to love one another as God loved us is to love one another while we are still enemies, and so, nevertheless, to “emerge from the security of what I am in myself and risk myself out there in the world that is neither my...world nor your ...world, but precisely the world between us in which we can be together.” [Jenson] The church is that world between, the community that calls us out of our deathly divisions and invites us to a table where we, by love, are being changed into each other. Death and resurrection.

“‘I conceive of my own life as a journey toward something I do not understand,’ James Baldwin once wrote, *‘which in the going toward, makes me better.’* It is ‘in the going toward,’” Glaude continues, “that salvation can be found. That imaginative leap, which allows us to see beyond ourselves and to reach for another. To be vulnerable, to tend and to love, to rip off the mask that blinds us to the beauty of the human being right in front of us. To recognize the distorting and disfiguring effect of hatred and fear, and the exacting power of love,” the love that casts out fear.

Thanks be to God.