

“Parables of Jesus: I – Perfect Love Casts Out Fear”

Karen F. Bunnell

Elkton United Methodist Church

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Luke 15:11-32

In the fall of 1963, I was in the third grade in Mrs. Christian’s class at Holly Hall Elementary School. One day, someone came into the classroom to tell our teacher the horrible news that President John F. Kennedy had been shot. I will never forget that day.

In the spring of 1968, I was in the eighth grade at Elkton (what was then called) Junior High School. Twice that spring, we learned that two of our country’s leaders – Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy had been shot. I will never forget those days.

I think it’s safe to say that nearly every single person in this room remembers where you were exactly ten years ago today. I was with the rest of our church’s staff in a staff meeting in Room 1. We could hear the phone ringing in the office, but the answering machine was on. We heard it ringing over and over again, but really that happens a lot early most mornings in the church office. When the secretary and treasurer left the staff meeting to go back to their desks, it was then that we learned the horrific news from New York (for that’s all we knew about at the time) – that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center in New York.

Instantly our meeting ended, and all of us did what all of you did – found a TV set, or a radio; called the ones we love to make sure they were alright, and well, just to hear their voices. It was an endless, emotional, gut-wrenching day that led to seemingly endless, emotional, gut-wrenching weeks. It changed us.

It changed us in a whole lot of ways. This week I was reading an article in Newsweek magazine about the many ways 9/11 changed us, and one article had a bunch of paragraphs entitled things like, “What We Read,” “What We Watch,” “Who We Admire” and so on. I was particularly gripped by the paragraph entitled, “What We Fear.”

It went like this: “The Enemy used to be easy to identify: he was a James Bond villain, a snarling Nazi, a stone-faced Russian, an evil dictator with an army goading us into war. But now, in the boundary-blurring 21st century, evil is diffuse, everywhere. Bad guys who looked indistinguishable from every other guy put bombs in trucks, buildings, their shoes, their underwear, and what could we do? Nothing really: worry. Look over our shoulder. ‘If you see something, say something.’ With each passing year, the threat seemed more insidious and less visible. China is reading our email. Weather scares us. We distrust the earth, our enemies, and each other. September 11th turned fear into a fact of life.” (Newsweek Magazine, Sept. 11, 2011, “How 9/11 Changed Our Culture”)

Fear is a terrible thing. Oh not, healthy fear, of course. Healthy fear protects us. But unchecked fear changes us. Franklin Roosevelt knew that when, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, he addressed Americans on the radio and reminded them that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

Perhaps because I was reflecting upon the events of 9/11 these past few days, I saw the Gospel lesson, the parable of the Prodigal Son, in a way I had never seen it before. You know, the parable of the Prodigal Son is so familiar to all of us that we could tell it from memory. It’s so familiar that likely you’ve heard much the same thing about it in many a sermon over the years.

I actually read a cute story about that this week. It seems that there was a pastor so committed to totally uncovering all of the meaning of the parable for this congregation that he preached a 16-week sermon series on it. 16 weeks on the Prodigal Son. Yikes! It was so bad that one woman was heard to whisper under her breath, “I wish the kid had never run away!”

It is a very familiar story, one about which I have personally preached many times. But it was not until this week, in the shadow of the 10th anniversary of September 11th, that I saw so clearly that it too is a story about fear.

The younger son is filled with fear. First, he fears that life will be filled with drudgery and work and no adventure, so he asks his father for his inheritance long before it was due him. He took it and went off and lived the high life – spending every cent he had until finally he had nothing.

Then real fear gripped him. The kind of fear that grips a person who finds himself or herself homeless, without resources, without a future. The kind of fear that keeps you awake at night. The kind of fear that makes you feel like you don’t have a friend in the world. That young son was right there. He was filled with fear for his future.

The older son had fear also – although I doubt that had you talked to him he would have ever recognized it as that. To him, it was righteous indignation. After all, he had been the good son. He had stayed when the younger son left his father in the lurch. He had not asked for his inheritance early. He had toiled at his father’s side while his younger brother lived the life of Riley. And he was mad, fighting mad when his brother sauntered home and was treated like some kind of hero. That brother surely

thought his young brother should have been punished, not welcomed home with arms open, and party horns blaring!

Why was he so mad? I think it was because, underneath it all, he was afraid. He was afraid that his father loved his brother more than him, that he was not going to get what was due him, that his steadfastness was not going to be rewarded. His fear was rooted in jealousy – why is my brother getting this kind of love and attention, and I'm not?

One pastor who preached on this lesson knew its truth so very well because he had grown up with a young brother like the one in the Gospel story. He said his brother attended no less than four high schools – getting thrown out of all of them – until finally he graduated from a fifth – a military academy. He was in his mid-thirties before, as this pastor said, “he was able to make a marriage work, and to return to middle-class respectability and a loving family.” The pastor said he so resented his brother, not because he finally had success, but (in his words) “because of the fact that he always had the greater share of our parents’ attention, mainly because he gave them so much more to worry about.” (On-line, “Prodigal People and the New Creation,” Robert Neville)

I'll bet some people here in this room can identify with that.

So the younger brother had fear, and the older brother had fear, and so, sadly did their father. Undoubtedly, he spent many years fearing for his younger son's life. Fearing at an early stage because the boy was so selfish, so concerned with getting everything that was coming to him, so concerned with

grabbing for it with all his might. What a sad thing it was for this father to see, and how scary to know that those were the things that were important to his son.

When his son marched out for parts unknown, his fear ratcheted up a bit, just as any parent's fear does when their child leaves home – but even more so, because he did it in haste, and with nary a look back for the family he was leaving. That father's fear was based on the knowledge that comes from maturity – things always look greener on the other side, and rarely are.

Even when that father's life is so filled with joy that he's ready to burst when that son comes home, even then fear comes back to him, when he sees his older son's reaction. His older son was so hostile and so incensed over the grace show to his brother, that his father had to fear for him. That kind of hostility, that kind of jealousy is poison in a person's soul, and that father's fear was that his oldest son was filled with poison that would kill him.

The sad thing about it all, that we see so clearly, looking at it from afar, is that none of that fear was necessary. The young son needn't have worried that he wouldn't get what was coming to him, and the older son needn't have feared that his father didn't love him as much as his brother. Both of them were afraid needlessly, and they were afraid even while staring in the face of love – the face of their father.

It's ironic that Jesus told this parable to a bunch of people who were also afraid – the Scribes and Pharisees who were challenging him. They were challenging him and criticizing him for hanging out with the wrong kind of people – and that kind of criticism is almost always based in fear. “What are you

doing giving those people – tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes, what are you doing giving those people the time of day? You should be hanging out with us religious people.”

Put on top of that the fact that the Scribes and Pharisees identified with the older son for they were the ones doing the day-in, day-out work of the faith – not the people Jesus was hanging out with. It wasn't fair! Fear . . .

And now, today, the parable is for our hearing, people living with a new kind of fear born of terrorism, along with all the other fears we bear simply by being human. So what are we to make of it?

What we are to make of it is this: There is enough to go around – enough love, enough patience, enough presence, enough grace – there is enough to go around. We don't have to grab for things. We don't have to be jealous of what others have, or when they have it. We don't have to worry that someone is better than us, or worse than us, more worthy or less worthy than us. We don't have to kill ourselves to be recognized and valued. There is enough love to go around, enough grace, enough mercy.

If we have learned anything in the aftermath of Sept. 11th, it is that we survived. We survived because God was with us, and is with us. Fear didn't stop us in our tracks, though it tried mightily. We still know joy, we still know love and mercy and grace, we still know freedom.

The scripture says, “perfect love casts out fear.” That is, if we let it. If we insist upon being fearful and clutching to our fear, we'll keep love at arm's length. But if we open our hearts and our lives

and give our fear to God, His perfect love poured out in Christ Jesus will cast it away, giving us grace to live our lives with hope and promise and even, joy.

In the end, it's our choice. It was the younger son's choice to come home to his father, and to embrace with joy. We don't know what the older son chose, the story doesn't tell us. Oh how I hope he chose joy. How I hope he didn't let the poison of jealousy and fear rule his life.

God's love, God's mercy, God's forgiveness is there for you – it's your's for the asking, but you need to ask. You need to ask God to help you lay down your fear, your burdens, your sins. He's waiting for you to come home.

Many years ago, a young woman wrote an essay about her father, an essay which Professor Tom Long read and shared in a sermon. In that essay "she said that when she was young, she was very close to her father. The time she experienced this closeness the most was when they would have big family gatherings with all the aunts and uncles and cousins. At some point, someone would pull out the old record player and put on polka records, and the family would dance. Eventually, someone would put on "The Beer Barrel Polka" and when the music of the "Beer Barrel Polka" played, her father would come up to her, tap her on the shoulder and say, 'I believe this is our dance,' and they would dance. One time, though, when she was a teenager and in one of those teenaged moods and the "Beer Barrel Polka" began to play and when her father tapped her on the shoulder and said, 'I believe this is our dance,' she snapped at him, 'Don't touch me! Leave me alone!' and her father turned away and never asked her to dance again.

‘Our relationship was difficult through all my teen years,’ she wrote. ‘When I would come home late from a date, my father would be sitting there in his chair, half asleep, wearing an old bathrobe, and I would snarl at him, ‘What do you think you’re doing?’ He would look at me with sad eyes and say, ‘I was just waiting on you.’

‘When I went away to college,’ the woman wrote, ‘I was so glad to get out of his house and away from him and for years I never communicated with him, but as I grew older, I began to miss him. One day I decided to go to the next family gathering, and when I was there, somebody put on the “Beer Barrel Polka.” I drew a deep breath, walked over to my father, tapped him on the shoulder and said, ‘I believe this is our dance.’ He turned toward me and said, ‘I’ve been waiting on you.’”

Tom Long finished her story by saying, “Standing at the corner of our life is the God who says to us, ‘Everything I have is yours. All that I am is for you, and I’ve been waiting on you.’” (On-line, “Is There Joy in God’s House?”, Dr. Thomas Long)

Indeed, God is waiting on you – today. He is waiting on you to lay down your fear and come home. He waits for you with open arms, ready to shower you with love and grace and mercy and strength, ready to carry you through every day that lies ahead.

My dear friends, perfect love casts out fear. So, as we’re about to sing, I invite you now, to “let the Son of God enfold you with His Spirit and His love, let Him fill your heart and satisfy your soul.” Lay down your fear, be not afraid, be at peace. Amen.