

LOVE VS FEAR & HATE

1 John 4: 7-8, 11-12, 16-21

1) The people of Israel and the early Christians were victims of empires. The bible is written in the voice of the victims. Empires and their kings conquer and rule by fuelling fear and hate. Fear keeps people enslaved and hate divides them against each other. That gives more control to those in power.

But in the 4th century after Christ, The Roman empire stops persecuting Christians and decides that the Christian religion is a great religion to unite the empire and make it stronger. While this decision stops all persecution of Christians, it also changes Christianity from a religion of the persecuted to a religion of persecutors. From a religion of loving compassion and solidarity with the victims, Christianity becomes primarily a religion of conquest, using fear and even hate to eradicate all other religious options, including alternative ways of being Christian to the ruling party's version.

By the 12th century, the Christian church has become so powerful in Europe, that the pope and his hierarchy are greater than any single king. The church has an army and lots of wealth. It conquers peoples, it terrorizes those who do not conform to right doctrine and uses fear to bring people into line. All those who dare to protest are imprisoned and publicly executed.

But in the 16th century (500 years ago), protests get so loud and intense, that a whole new church is born, a church called: Protestant. We at Armour Heights, part of the Presbyterian church, have roots in this larger Protesting movement. We are Protestants.

2) So what we're we protesting?

1. We were protesting the corrupting nature of power, using fear and hate to enslave people and keep them down through guilt, shame and fear of eternal damnation.

2. We were protesting the church gaining wealth at the expense of the masses, keeping them ignorant, illiterate and stuck in poverty, forced to pay taxes so the church could build opulent cathedrals and ensure the hierarchy lived in sumptuous luxury.

Not only does this have nothing to do with Jesus and his gospel, but it destroys the very heart of it. The gospel is all about love. Love stands against fear and hate which are used to enslave people. Love seeks the flourishing of people in spirit, mind and body. But how can love **liberate** people enslaved by fear and hate? Let's explore our scripture reading...

3) In this letter, John is writing to a community threatened by persecution from without and conflict from within. There is fear and there is animosity bordering on hate. He declares to them that if they worship God, they need to understand that "God is love." Love stands against fear and against hate. How? First, he says this about fear: "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." We fear punishment

because we feel guilt and shame, that we are unworthy of being loved, that we deserve condemnation. This is how others make us feel small, weak and under their control.

Second, John says this about hate: Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." All people are made in the image of God (Genesis 1). To hate any human is equivalent to hating God.

- To be filled with love you must be free of the kind of fear that you are unworthy of being loved, worthy of judgement and punishment. If you cannot love yourself as you are loved by God, how can you truly love others.
- And to be filled with love you must be free of the kind of hate that thinks of your fellow human with contempt, as your enemy to be ridiculed, shamed, dismissed and crushed. If you hate others made in God's image like you, how can you truly love God?

And so, God, self and others form a trinity of relationships. Either love connects these relationships or it is fear and hate. You cannot love others truly if you don't love yourself truly as you are loved. And you cannot love God truly if you do not love others truly as God loves them.

4) In Iran today, there is the very same dynamic being played out. There are protests, why? It's all about fear and hate against love. True freedom is embracing yourself as loved by God and this gives you the courage to protest. True freedom is to love others even your enemies. You pray for them even as you stand against their fear and hate. You stand on love. Love for yourself as you are loved and love for your neighbour, beginning with the women around you as God loves them like God loves you. Against a religion that sees God as a judge who punishes, we need a religion that sees God as a Love who embraces... We continue to protest anywhere in the world and in our own lives where love for yourself, for others and for the earth is threatened by fear and hate.

Make us ever greater lovers, O God... Amen.