

## LOVE VERSUS FEAR

Matthew 6: 25-33

One of the most fascinating books I read last year was by a Dutch journalist named: Rutger Bregman. The book is entitled: *Humankind: A Hopeful History*. It's a book many of us read together in our church book club. And I found it fascinating because Bregman's whole argument, thoroughly researched, is that human history is not as terrible in its progression as most of us believe it is. Whether it's war, poverty, disease and suffering of many kinds, real life data suggests many things are better than they ever have been despite all the trouble and suffering that is still happening today. Bregman looks at real life experiments in human nature and human communities, and he argues quite persuasively that even though there is conflict and harm that has happened and continues to happen, much more prevalent is the reality of people looking out for one another and caring for each other in families, communities and as friends.

So why is it that many of us still believe the world is as bad if not worse than it ever has been? Is it based on facts or on fear? In a world of 24/7 news what gets our attention and sells more than anything else, it's fear. In fact, many have called fear the greatest of pandemics afflicting us humans, or as many have called it: a "feardemic".

Professor Timothy Caulfield from the University of Alberta puts it like this: As humans we are "evolutionarily hard-wired to prioritize emotional content, especially scary and maddening stuff. This powerful tendency – called the negativity bias – is universal, and, for most of human history, worked in our favour... But in today's chaotic information environment, this propensity is being exploited: by the media algorithms that decide what content we see; by marketers to sell products; by politicians to garner votes; and by state actors to create distrust and divide us. It is also facilitating the profound distortion of our reality, allowing our beliefs and behaviours to be informed more by scary lies than nuanced facts... Sex may sell, but long term, fear and rage increasingly shape our worldview."

In an article based on his recent book, Caulfield also lists several things fear is doing to us more specifically. First, he writes, all the scary news headlines and stories are only making us more fearful, angry, upset and anxious. There is a lot of psychological data being collected by researchers documenting how our fearful perception of reality out there is causing us to be even more fearful within ourselves. Second, he writes, "the current 'feardemic' is helping spread harmful and polarizing misinformation. People are more energized by outrage-evoking stories, whether fact based or not, than anything that suggests things are not as bad as all that.

Third, Caulfield writes, a major consequence of a negative and fearful outlook is that it causes policymakers and voters to focus on the wrong things. He notes the example of crime and viruses. While many people seize on headlines that point out crimes happening and bad

reactions to vaccines, the reality is that crime has been going down at all levels in North America over the past several decades and for every adverse reaction to a vaccine there are millions, young and old, receiving life-saving injections that have improved overall health outcomes consistently over the last several generations. Fourth and finally, he writes, and perhaps worst of all, fear and rage have been used to increase inequities, hate, stigmatization, violence and social mistrust. In Caulfield's words: "Fear is a powerful force. Fear gets votes. Fear builds brands. Fear gets attention. Fear generates engagement, even if that fear is based on an entirely incorrect representation of reality."

OK, so what do we do to counter such fear and live in a more life-giving, positive and constructive way? While Caulfield and Bregman offer some positive and practical recommendations, it's hard to change people at the heart level. And as many of us know, the heart also shapes the mind. We can know a truth or fact in our heads, but how do we release the angst, the fear, the anger and the mistrust in our hearts making way for more positive energies?

Here's where I want to bring in our scripture reading. Jesus is teaching the crowds with the words of his famous "Sermon on the Mount." In our reading he's teaching all about the problem of fear in the form of worry. Jesus' basic message is that worry is a useless quality to help us get through life in any positive way. Worry uses up all our positive energy and leaves us drained, scared, mistrusting and isolated. But imagine the audience Jesus is addressing. People in Jesus' time were way worse off than anything most any of us have to face. How can he just tell people not to worry without burdening them with something more that they can never reach. Unless... unless Jesus has some positive strategy up his sleeve. What could that be?

Well, let me make several points based on who Jesus is and what he says.

First of all, Jesus doesn't talk down to people from some lofty place of privilege and wealth when he tells them not to worry about their material welfare. Jesus, too, has grown up in poverty just like the rest of them. Jesus, too, has been stuck in a system where the few wealthy and powerful are making all the decisions and controlling all the resources of land and crops for their own benefit while grinding down the masses of their people in heavy labour with few benefits. Jesus is someone they can trust if they can believe him versus their wealthy and powerful authorities who feed them misinformation about their enemies and threaten them with eternal damnation or violence should they disobey.

What's different about Jesus is that he has genuine compassion for the people because he is one of them. The God he is revealing and embodying is one who is among them, suffers with them and seeks to raise them up from within their own resources empowered by the Spirit. Jesus is all about love and love comes down to be one with the people, not threaten them from above and controlling them by fear of judgement, threats of violence or economic ruin.

But second, Jesus also challenges them with some tough talk. It's so easy to get swallowed up by material concerns – food, shelter, clothing, especially when you have so little and whatever you have is so precarious. People can get so obsessed by their material concerns all other thoughts fall away and all care for their neighbour evaporates. Everyone becomes reduced to me-myself-and-I and my own and to heck with everyone else. But who does such fear and anxiety serve in the end? It serves the wealthy and powerful who rule, because dividing and conquering the people by reducing them to isolated individuals, families and groups living in fear, desperation and helplessness makes them more docile and mindless sheep. What Jesus is trying to do is wake them up to something better for themselves and those around them.

And Jesus uses the natural world to help awaken people to something better. Look at the birds of the air, Jesus says. Look at the lilies of the field. Are they buried by worry and fear? Or are they free? They live in trust and they work within a larger environment of reciprocity with mother earth. Their needs are covered and their beauty shines brighter than all the glitter and gold of material wealth. Think about it. See and learn how the animals, the flowers and mother earth work together.

And this leads, thirdly, to Jesus positive focus for people's passion. It's not enough to tell people not to worry and let go their fear. Unless they have something better and more positive to focus on than material needs alone, how can they let such all-consuming concerns take second place? Here's what Jesus says: "Strive first for the kingdom of God and God's justice, and see how all these things may be given to you as well."

OK, there's a lot here. What is the kingdom of God and God's justice? Jesus has made it very clear. It's all about building relationships of love and networks of care for one another, supporting one another and reciprocating the support so that families, communities and whole societies may be constructed with the building blocks of love rather than fear. The whole point of Jesus coming into the world as God's Word of love made flesh is to create this ripple affect of love spreading outwards swallowing up the demonic forces of fear which spread suspicion and hate all fed by misinformation by those who want to control people.

And what of God's justice? In a world where fear is so prevalent and threatening to the movement of love, justice means calling out and standing up against mistreatment and oppression of every kind. We need to name how fear is destroying our perception of reality and truth, our perception of other people who are different and how we are being manipulated by sinister forces of greed and selfishness hungry for ever greater power and control. Without love growing within us and fear managed we can never be free.

This is Jesus message and he inspires it with his life, his death and for those who believe, his resurrection. The resurrection witnesses to the ultimate victory of love which rises up again and again after it is crushed by violence and hate.

And this, my friends, finally brings it to us here and now as church and as those who live in this land we call Canada. It's easy to catch the virus of fear, and it's all-to-easy to allow fear to determine our choices and our perception of reality. We have done amazing things as a congregation. Through a pandemic we have not only survived but thrived in ways we could never have imagined. We discerned the wind of the Spirit blowing through among us and we ran with it wherever it took us. Would we have enough money to weather the storm and pay for everything? What would the markets do to our investments? Would people engage and re-engage in church? Who would those people be? Would they be like us or different than us? Can church be different than what we have known it to be and still be church?

The question has always been and will continue to be: is fear going to determine our choices or is love? Will discomfort and mistrust of what is different and altogether new drive us or will openness to trust that it is the Spirit driving us forward do it? Yes, we need to plan and we need to organize. Yes, we need to be prudent and thoughtful with our spending. But we also need to take risks in faith and hope, trusting that choices made for love, inclusion, accessibility, outreach and care for those near and far will bear rich fruit in spreading God's kingdom of love and justice against the reign of fear.

And this is equally true for us who live in this land called Canada. We have a lot to learn and many ways we need to grow in love overcoming fear and caring for all beginning with those most vulnerable and marginalized. And yet, we are also threatened because of new instability and uncertainty, having to prepare and plan strategically against new threats and fears... But may we become ever more committed to growing in the way of love rather than capitulating to fear and making choices out of fear. May we expand in our loving rather than contracting into me-myself-and-I and my own and to heck with the rest.

God is still God, Jesus is still calling us to follow, and the Spirit is still blowing seeking open hearts to flow in and through... May we here and now as persons and as members of this congregation of Christ's body we call Armour Heights, shine our light brighter than ever today and in the weeks, months and years to come... Amen.