

Love Trumps Fear©
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet
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Anyone who has been attending to the news knows that there is a significant amount of very disturbing stuff happening in the world of late. In numerous countries around the globe people are fleeing their homes because they are threatened by armed gangs, violent extremists, opposing armies, or even their own government. In the year there have been terrorist attacks in France, Nigeria, Pakistan, and here in this country. All have received international attention. With all of the violence and threats of violence that are occurring, the reaction that many people are having is both predictable and understandable. When a threat is either experienced or perceived, a typical response is to feel fear.

Today, many people in our country are feeling fearful. That fear can be seen in any number of ways. One example is the recent significant increase in gun sales in many states across our country. Another is recent statements by politicians and aspiring politicians about keeping certain people out of our country. It seems to me that such statements do more than just name or identify the fear that people have. They often encourage and instigate fear. Some of the statements being made are encouraging and instigating fear by taking the facts, the grain of truth from events, and implying that certain specific events, in specific places, pose a threat to everyone, everywhere. I am troubled by this. I am troubled by this because encouraging and instigating fear is often more harmful than beneficial. We all know that shouting “fire” in a crowded movie theater where no fire exists can get people hurt or even killed. It is important then, that all of us, and especially those who are in the public spotlight, refrain from fanning the embers of fear to create an inferno that may engulf people who are innocent of any wrongdoing. We may not realize it, but fear, especially inappropriate or unjustified fear, may pose more of a threat to us than that which we are fearful of.

Fear, you see, has the ability to generate and hold an incredible amount of emotional charge. And fear, especially intense fear, can cause people to react in ways that are irrational and at times even destructive. Fear triggers what is often referred to as the fight or flight response. The flight response is what creates the problem when someone shouts “fire” in a crowded movie theater. The fight response is intended to protect us from imminent harm through preparing us to engage the threat in battle. That is what it is supposed to do, but when we are fearful, our ability to accurately identify what is a threat and what isn’t may be significantly compromised. That is because when we feel fearful the part of our brain where we think things through and make conscious decisions takes a backseat to the portion that reacts almost instantaneously. And fight or flight aren’t the only things fear can trigger. Fear can also cause us to freeze. You may have heard the phrase “frozen by fear.” Fear can stop us from responding when it is both appropriate and necessary to act.

I am not implying here that fear is bad or doesn’t have its place. Fear is an important emotion, one that has helped our species reach the point we are at today. Fear has its place and its time. My concern is about fear that is fueled or fostered at an inappropriate place or time. I am concerned that fear is being used to further an ideology instead of to help people survive and thrive. In this time of heightened fear and fiery rhetoric we need an option that allows us time to rest. An option that let’s us step out of the fear so we can fully use all parts of our brain and feel our full range of emotions. We need an alternative that can give us hope for the future.

There are very likely a number of options that would fill the bill. From both my training and experience as a clinical social worker, I know that cognitive behavioral approaches can be helpful to combatting irrational fear. My training and experience have also shown me that having an emotional alternative to turn to can make a positive difference as well. Today I want to focus on one such emotional alternative that is lifted up with reverence in many religious traditions from around the world. That alternative is love.

Love, like fear, can hold a very strong emotional charge. And certain kinds of love can cause us to act irrationally just as fear can. I am over sixty but I still recall some of the less than well thought out choices I made in my youth as a result of falling in love. Those may be fodder for a future sermon, but I highly doubt it. Anyway, that romantic type of love, called “eros” in Greek, didn’t always allow me to use both my head and my heart when making decisions.

The kind of love I am referring to when I say love trumps fear isn’t romantic love. The type of love I am talking about here is that which is identified by the ancient Greek word “agape.” Agape is considered to be the highest type of love— love that is unselfish, altruistic and charitable. From my studies of various religious traditions this is the type of love that a good number of great spiritual teachers have advocated. Among these teachers are the Buddha and Jesus. In the Buddhist tradition loving-kindness is considered to be one of the Divine Abidings or Sublime States. A Buddhist practitioner is encouraged to meditate on and practice loving-kindness in every aspect of life.

Jesus, in the book of John, gave a new commandment to his disciples. He instructed them to love one another as he had loved them. In the book of Matthew he told his disciples to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...” It seems highly likely that this particular verse is the basis for the bumper sticker I’ve seen on numerous occasions that says “When Jesus said love your enemies, I’m pretty sure he meant don’t kill them.” It seems to me that the world would be considerably better off today if there was more of the kind of love that the Buddha and Jesus lived and advocated for.

In my estimation there is currently an over-abundance of fear in the world. Fear that can quickly and easily lead to viewing others as the enemy and a threat. When we go into the fight response in reaction to our fear, people can end up getting hurt or even being killed. Today our world could benefit from considerably less fear, especially unnecessary and inappropriate fear. And what a positive difference it would make if there was more love, the kind of love that Jesus and the Buddha spoke of.

Now I realize that developing and manifesting the kind of love I am talking about can be very difficult. Some might even say it is impossible to attain and consistently demonstrate this type of love. We are, after all, merely human. Yes, we are merely human and yes, this type of love may be impossible for us to live into every moment of every day. I would go so far as to say that we might not even be able to live it out most moments of any given day. But the fact that we are currently limited in our ability to feel and show such love doesn’t mean we should give up trying to do so. Let me tell you the reasons I say this.

People who study human behavior and emotions tell us that a basic function of fear is to assist us in addressing threats, real or perceived. Fear helps us survive. In order for fear to be beneficial to us though, it needs to allow us to accurately identify what is a threat and what isn’t. The problem is, as I mentioned previously, we don’t tend to do this well when we feel threatened. Our Story for All Ages today provided a good example of what I am talking about here. Jeremy Ross quickly became enemy number one because of a few behaviors that were hurtful to the story’s main character. Hurt and fear of future hurt then created a wall that separated the two young boys. Luckily there was a wise and loving adult who was able to intervene.

The intervention, I must admit, was somewhat devious. It was devious but it seems to me it was also very loving and caring. Clearly the father loved his son who was hurt and fearful. While it may not seem obvious, the father was also caring towards Jeremy Ross. He cared enough about Jeremy Ross to do something that risked the trust between father and son. He had enough faith in love to take an action that was for both his son’s and Jeremy Ross’ higher good. It seems to me that this is an example of the kind of love that could benefit not only each of us individually but also all of us collectively.

So here, in a nutshell, is why I believe love trumps fear. Fear may protect us for the short term but love is what sustains us for the long term. Fear tends to separate us—by us here I mean the larger us. Love, on the other hand connects us. Fear narrows our perceptions while love expands not only our perceptions but our possibilities as well. And finally, the walls, both physical and emotional, that are

created out of fear eventually become a cage that we lock ourselves in—and sometimes we forget where we put the key. The bonds that are built with love support us and nurture us through the inevitable times of weakness, vulnerability and uncertainty.

The question then becomes, which emotion, fear or love, do we allow to play a bigger role in our lives? Which would most benefit not just you and me, but our country and our world. As for me, I will put my faith and trust in love. My hope is that someday those who are currently promoting fear and separation will learn the recipe for making enemy pie. The world would be considerably better off with more of us sharing pies and fewer of us caged behind walls of our own making. It is my hope that many more people will find it within themselves to spread the love and share the pie.

May it be so.