

Rev. Dr. Anne B. Epling
First Presbyterian Church
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Exodus 1:8-2:10
Luke 10:25-37

#2 in Unafraid Series: Crime Race, Terrorism

“Get Into Good Trouble”

Every day, as people of faith, when we look at the news, we’re called to ask ourselves “How does the Gospel want me to respond to this?”

And some days the question is more urgent than others.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor and widely respected 20th century theologian, who was murdered by the Nazis because of what he believed and stood for, said “the sin of respectable people is the refusal to be socially and politically responsible.”

All over the world, in virtually every nation and culture, those who are “different” face prejudice because of ethnicity, race, poverty, lack of education or many other markers of “otherness.” In the US, racial tensions – or shall I just say – racism, seems to have reached an all-time-high. Jesus knew that one of the most common ways we deal with fear is to turn it into hate toward those we fear, and he preached that we should love our enemies and approach violence with non-violence. Both of those are hard things to do.

And so this morning our topic is fear of “the other” and what I think a Christian response is. Not because I have all the answers, and not because I always do what is right, but because remaining silent is irresponsible and more importantly, not a faithful thing to do.

I hope you’ll bear with me and forgive me if I say anything that might offend you, still join me in conversation if I do, and be willing to be a part of the conversation no matter how uncomfortable it makes us.

Read the scripture.

Lord of all, when difference offends me, or when prejudice enrages me, remind me that you came to change my heart. Help me, like you, to meet evil with good. Amen.

Fear sells. In just 20 days, the Trump campaign spent \$20 million dollars, or 70% of its ad buy, on TV commercials with one goal: to terrify you. The ads talk about angry mobs, and have pictures of protests and empty police stations. The ads paint a picture of a country devoid of law and order in the hopes of securing your vote.

Now, Trump isn't the first one to play the fear card; it's as old as any election. In the 2008 election Hillary Clinton had a commercial about the infamous red phone in the White House ringing at 3 in the morning, with the voiceover that said, "It's 3am in the White House. Who do you want answering the phone?" It played upon our fears of having a young inexperienced Senator from Illinois, who just happened to be black, answering that phone.

These types of ads play on people's deepest fear of the other, and uses them as scapegoats. Why?

Because fear is a motivator.

But fear does other things, too.

It paralyzes us, and causes us to say and do irrational things. Dare I say, unfaithful things.

Maybe that's why the Bible's most repeated phrase is "Fear not."

Because the writers knew it was hard to be both fearful and faithful.

Moses' story is born out of fear. (up tick)

It begins with a simple phrase that says it all:

"Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph."

In this simple announcement, a profound change occurs.

What was once a mutually beneficial relationship between the Egyptians and the Hebrews, now becomes adversarial. For you see, the new king is threatened by

the Hebrew people. Their population is growing rapidly, and the new king sees this as a threat. Should the Hebrew people become unhappy, they may decide to fight the Egyptians. Or, they may decide to join forces with one of Egypt's enemies to overtake the Egyptians. So the Pharaoh begins to scapegoat them, saying they're a threat to security and claiming they're an internal menace.

His fear spread to other Egyptians, who began treating the Hebrews horribly. They oppressed them, and forced them into hard labor.

Notice that *the king*, the Pharaoh, *the most powerful ruler on earth*, is threatened by a minority population of shepherders. He fears them, a fear that, as best we know, was irrational.

But irrational fear is still real fear, and it can be very dangerous. It leads us to say and do horrible things and then justify those horrible things. It doesn't take a PhD in history to think of examples around the world and in our country in which fear of minority populations has led people to oppress, dehumanize and at times kill those viewed as strangers.

Fear is the motivator behind hate crimes.

Fear is what led the Pharaoh to despise the Israelites, and to order the murder of all Hebrew baby boys.

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Murray Bowen was a psychiatrist and pioneer in the field of systems theory. Among his insights are the tendency of a system to resist change and our tendency to manage fear and anxiety about that change by focusing on a third party. This third party becomes a scapegoat for our anxiety, and we unfairly blame them for our problems. Usually these third parties have less power and prestige than we do.

To read the story of the blame put on the Hebrews is to be given the opportunity to ask, "When have we scapegoated others, or silently watched that happen to others?" and "What have we done about it?"

Fear of the "other" leads us to act in ways that are inhumane.

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Ironically, the only place fear is ever said to be a faithful response, is when the Bible talks about fearing the Lord.

Now, I realize we don't like to think about fearing God, because generally we prefer God to be kind, generous, loving and gracious, but I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that we should fear God more than we do. In fact, we should fear God more than anyone and anything else.

Why?

Because if we feared God to the point that we thought our words or actions or lack thereof might be offensive to God, we might start living more faithfully.

Shiprah and Puah, the two midwives who saved the Hebrew baby boys from the hands of the murderous Pharaoh, feared God more than they feared the Pharaoh. They refused to go along with the Pharaoh's vicious plan because they feared God; they feared that if they went along with the Pharaoh's plan in order to save their **own** lives, God would be really upset with them. So they let the baby boys live.

Can you imagine the courage of these two women to defy the king? I don't know that I can. I don't know that I've ever been called on to have that much courage. Have you?

This is one of the first recorded acts of civil disobedience in all of scripture. (And it won't be the last.) Because of the women's disobedience, they saved the lives of countless children, including that of Moses.

In the story of Shiprah and Puah, we find two remarkable women who remind us what courage looks like and who invite us to join them in resisting evil even if doing so comes at personal cost.

The question for all of us is: are we willing to take a stand like that, even if it may cost us personally? I'd like to think I'm faithful enough that I would, but I don't know.

Last week we lost a giant of a man who did resist evil at great personal cost. John Lewis's faith was the framework for his activism, and it was his source of strength in the face of cruelty. Lewis, who went to seminary, had a deep and abiding faith, and it was his faith and the faith of others that started the civil rights movement. In a 2004 interview, he said that he was deeply concerned that many people today fail to recognize that the Civil Rights movement grew out of a sense of a faith – faith in God and faith in one's fellow human beings. *"From time to time," he said, "I make a point, trying to take people back, and especially young people, and those of us not so young, back to the roots of the movement. During those early days, we didn't study the Constitution, the Supreme Court decision of 1954. We studied the great religions of the world. We discussed and debated the teachings of the great teacher. And we would ask questions about what would Jesus do."*

And [he believed](#) that the movement for civil rights "was based on the simple truth of the Great Teacher: love thy neighbor as thyself."

How does one love thy neighbor as thyself? One helps their neighbor. One does what the Good Samaritan did: stops to help the man in the ditch, binds up the man's wounds, anoints them, lifts the man onto the back of his own beast of burden, takes him to an inn, arranges for his keep, and promises to come back and pay the bill.

And who is one's neighbor? Everyone. Without exception.

But like the lawyer in the story, we always want to argue the point and define our neighbor because we have this deep seated need to establish our own identity against that of another, some stranger, outcast, inferior.

But here's Jesus, the Great Teacher, reaching beyond boundaries, teaching us that all are beloved children of God, deserving of love and care and compassion, acceptance and dignity and freedom and life: black-white, male-female, rich-poor, Muslim-Jew, gay-straight, Republican-Democrat, liberal-conservative. Goodness,

according to Jesus, is having compassion for another human being, regardless of who he or she is, and doing what is necessary to help.

Friends, do we fear God enough to break the cycle of fear and hatred?

Do we fear God enough to own up to the responsibility we bear for what is happening with race relations in our country?

Or will we keep committing the sin, as Bonhoeffer said, of respectable men and women who refuse to be socially and politically responsible?

In the aftermath of events in Selma, [King went to Brown Chapel AME](#) to pay tribute to the marchers. "If a man happens to be 36 years old, as I happen to be, and some great truth stands before the door of his life, some great opportunity to stand up for that which is right," King said, and "he is afraid his home will get bombed, or he is afraid that he will lose his job, or he is afraid that he will be shot, or beat down by state troopers, he may go on and live until he is 80, [but] he's just as dead at 36 as he would be at 80, and the cessation of breathing in his life is merely the belated announcement of an earlier death of the spirit. A man dies when he refuses to stand up for what is right. A man dies when he refuses to stand up for justice. A man dies when he refuses to take a stand for that which is true."

Are we going to allow our fear to stand in the way of living and of allowing others to live life to its fullest, too?

"Sometimes you have to do something out of the ordinary. Sometimes you have to make a way out of no way," Lewis said. "We have been too quiet for too long. There comes a time when you have to say something, when you have to make a little noise, when you have to move your feet (and get in good trouble). This is the time. Now is the time . . ."

For if not us, who?

And if not now, when?

Amen.

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