

Christianity and Fear

John 14:1-6

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Fear of poverty can make us rise early in the morning and go to work. Fear of failure can cause us to pull the covers over our head and stay in bed. Fear of being all alone can spur us to attend a party of strangers in the hopes of finding a new friend. Fear of rejection can induce us to turn down an invitation from friends because we're not sure they'll like us once they get to know us. Fear of the death of a child can turn us into hyper vigilant and overbearing parents that never let our kids out of our sight. Fear of losing a child to rebellion can drive us to become permissive parents that grant every request that crosses our children's minds. Fear of the unknown can keep us in jobs that are literally killing us. Fear of the routine can cause us to abandon jobs that are literally sustaining us. Fear of death can freeze us in terror of each passing year. Fear of life and all its trouble can send us rushing into the arms of death.

Fear is an emotional magnetic force that either draws us in one direction or repels us in another. Psychiatrist and author Gerald May writes in his book **Simply Sane** that we are always dealing with various layers of fear. Some layers sort of haunt us in the background of our minds, others jump out at us and screech, scaring us to our wits end. Whether the fears are prominent or softly nagging, May says that all of our fears are centered in our dread of losing something. We may be apprehensive about losing control of our lives or a significant relationship or someone we love, but, May declares, all fear is related to our anxiety about losing something we value.

In John 14, Jesus tells his followers, "Let not your heart be troubled." The advice did not seem to help his followers much. Days after Jesus encouraged his disciples to face the future without trepidation, Judas betrayed him and then took his own life because he feared he would not be forgiven. Peter denied him three times because he feared the reprisals of a servant girl. The rest of the disciples scattered into hiding because they feared the Jewish leaders would treat them as they had treated Jesus.

A pattern is on display here that seems very familiar. The disciples were all for Jesus until their support began to cost them something. When it appeared that they might lose something, their right to be in the synagogue, the acceptance of their peers, the approval of their families, their freedom, their livelihoods, their lives, they gave way to fear. They were neither the first nor the last believers to do so.

Abraham and Sarah were all for following God as long as their faithfulness was rewarded with land and blessing. When it appeared that trusting God might cost them the privilege of having a son, however, they took matters into their own hands. Refusing to wait on God to fulfill his promise in God's own way, Sarah told Abraham to have sexual relations with her servant Hagar. He did and trouble ensued.

David was all for trusting God as long as the Lord was giving him thrones and realms to rule. When he began to age, however, and feared he would lose his virility and youthfulness, David brooded as he walked along the roof of his palace. From there he spotted Bathsheba and decided that an affair with a younger woman might be just the elixir to rejuvenate his flagging spirit. Trouble ensued.

Queen Esther was all for trusting God as long as the Lord was opening the doors of the King's palace and privilege to her. When Mordecai called on her to speak to the king in an attempt to save her people, however, Esther thought about everything she could lose by such an act and, in her initial fear, told her relative she could not obey God at such a dangerous moment in history. Thank God she eventually got over her fears, but her first response was to play it safe and reject the guidance of God.

Our commitment to anything is rather meaningless until it cost us something. To say we love this church is a rather empty phrase if, when asked to give up time or money to demonstrate that love, we fearfully decline. This time of year the Nominating Committee is out seeking volunteers to serve on the various commissions and committees of the church. Folks continually reply to them that accepting a position would create a hardship upon them so they feel they must decline. When we respond that way, we are acting much like our spiritual ancestors who continually told God they loved him with all their heart until God asked something difficult of them.

A recent article in The Washington Post documented that it is just this kind of fear that causes churches to die. They see their resources overtaxed and draw inward, closing ranks, reducing ministry and cutting programs. As the acts of service shrink to almost nothing, the church goes on life support and then draws its last breath.

In contrast, The Christian Citizen magazine's issue entitled "Small Church Big Mission" documents story after story of small churches that overcame their fears, committed to specific acts of service in their community, contributed their time, money and effort to their mission and came to life again. A church of seven members in Frankford, West Virginia discovered that 75 children in their local school system received their breakfast and lunch from the school, but often returned in the evening to homes that had very little food at night. In response, the little congregation breathed deeply and pledged to provide lunches for those kids every week night from January through Easter. The ministry met such a clear need, money and help came from all over the community to bolster their efforts and grew their church. The ministry has been continued indefinitely.

Our own church faces some momentous decisions concerning our building and our ministries. Last week we dreamed together and there was a lot of enthusiasm in our discussions. Soon, in order for those dreams to be turned into realities, however, we will have to make commitments in some new directions. Faithfulness to God in this process will involve costs. We will have to increase our tithes and offerings. Every member will need to sacrifice and give. Each person in the congregation will need to divert some time from other interests and help the church reach out to our community. The mission before us is a little scary. If we give into our fears, however, and turn away from our calling, what does our pledge of discipleship really mean?

Of course our fears don't simply affect our life at church. Our apprehension of loss, pain, vulnerability and abandonment permeates our lives. Fears of the demands of education cause some people to settle for a career that is less than God intended. Fear of the sacrifices of marriage cause some to stay single when God had a partner all ready for them. Fear of the challenges of parenting keep some folks childless when God groomed them to provide the nurture for the next generation of believers. Fear of disapproval keeps some people hiding their true selves from their family and friends. Fear of rejection keeps some folks from talking about their love for Christ in the company of unbelieving co-workers. Fear of failure keeps some from launching the dreams God has inspired. Fear of reprisal keeps some silent when we ought to speak out against the injustice, racism or evil around us. Ghandhi warned us about this when he said, "Fearlessness is the first requisite of spirituality. Cowards can never be moral."

With all these fears cycling around us, maybe we ought to stop and hear the words of a brave and insightful poet. Mary Oliver, in her beautiful revelation entitled "When Death Comes" writes, "when death comes like an iceberg between the should blades, I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wandering what is it going to be

like, that cottage of darkness? . . . when its over, I want to say: all my life I was a bride married to amazement. I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms. When its over, I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened, or full of argument. I don't want to end up simply having visited this world."

Gratefully we live in communion with a Christ who does not want us to live afraid of life and death, "sighing and frightened, or full of argument." After telling his disciples, "do not let your hearts be troubled" Jesus offered the antidote to fear. He said, "Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go and prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."

This wondrous passage of Scripture is so comforting that we almost always read it at funerals. But the chief importance of the passage is not to help us with death. Probably it was the old King James Version that got us slightly off track. The classic translation quotes Jesus as saying, "In my Father's house there are many mansions." From that phrase developed the idea that Jesus had gone to heaven to build us a palace for our heavenly retirement. The actual Greek words translated as "many mansions" are a lot of fun to say. They are pronounced monai pollai. The only other time in Scripture we find them is in John 14:23 when Jesus says "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home (our monai pollai) with them." Jesus promised to build us a home in him, as well as heaven. Jesus is our home. We reside in his love, his power, his security, his truth. Nothing, Romans says, can cause us to get kicked out of this home. Nothing can separate us from Christ's love. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus has built a spiritual home in which all believers dwell and nothing can ever take that away. Our fears can be alleviated by the truth that we are sheltered with Christ forevermore. Whatever we face, we face it with Christ.

There is a huge difference between losing something and giving it a way. The knowledge that our home is in Jesus allows us to give our time, money and energy to the work of Christ rather than complain that God has taken something from us. Rather than moan that we've lost so much free time to our work on a committee at church we can thank God for the opportunity to give our time to accomplish Christ's mission. Instead of griping about the money we've lost to tithing, we can thank God for the opportunity to give from our resources to advance the cause of Christ. Jesus' promise to give us a home here and beyond frees us up to serve and give joyfully.

It takes awhile for Christ's teaching to sink in, however. When the apostle Thomas heard this promise, he spoke up, "but Jesus we don't know how all this is going to end up. How can we follow you fearlessly if we don't know what's up ahead, if we can't preview every step of the way. Jesus replied, "I'm the way. You don't have to know every turn in the road because I'm going to be with you. Do not fear the unknown, for I will be by your side."

Years ago my father was driving our family to visit relatives in Dallas, Texas. We reached the largest city we had every been in after dark and soon it became clear that my father did not know how to find my Aunt Mary's house. He stopped at a gas station and got directions and followed them the best he could, but as his stress level mounted with each darkened road, his exasperation mushroomed. After three more stops for further directions, my father simply pulled into the driveway of a total stranger and went up and rang the doorbell. We watched as the good Samaritan waved his hand one way and then the other as my father looked forlorn under the man's porch light. In the car, we openly shared our opinion that dad still didn't know how to get us to our destination. Then, just when we were ready to give in to our worst fears, the stranger motioned by dad back to our car. With relief settling on his face, my dad backed the car out of the driveway as the intuitive man backed his own car out and took the lead. My dad said, "all we have to do is follow him and we'll get there." Within ten minutes we were at the address that had eluded us for over an hour. We didn't need directions, we needed a companion.

Directions aren't enough to allay our fears. When Jesus told his disciples not to let their hearts be troubled, it didn't help anymore that it helps us when a well meaning friend tells us not to be afraid. Thank God, therefore, that Christ gave us more than directions, he has offered himself as our lifelong companion. Because of Christ's wondrous gift of Himself, we can take the world into our arms and embrace the life God has provided. We can finally obey the words Jesus gave us so many centuries ago and calm our troubled hearts.