

LESSONS IN LIVING

From Fear of God to Courage to Love

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Readings: Proverbs 1:1-7; I John 4:16b-21 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

I think one of the formative experiences of my life was that my grandparents were morticians (*laughter*), and that we would sometimes spend vacation in their house, which was also the funeral home. So they lived upstairs, in the bedroom, and the bodies were downstairs. So if we ever forgot our crayolas, we'd have to go down through these long hallways of dimly lit bodies, and it kinda changes how you see things (*laughter*)... when that happens.

The idea of putting lipstick on a corpse (pause)... was very disturbing to me as a child, and the people looked a whole lot worse, when everybody was talking about how beautiful they looked and how they looked like they were asleep. As a kid, I'll just say, that horrified me.

When I got to college, one of the things I wanted to do was understand a bigger view of religion than I'd been given. And one of the first books that I read – not in classes but to the side of the classes – was *Why I Am Not A Christian* by Bertram Russell. (*laughter*) I wanted to hear what it looked like from the outside. And he believed that religion was born of fear; that because human beings have trouble accepting the fact that we're going to die, he believed that, in a sense, religion is this make-up that we put on that corpse, where we're able to live in denial.

Have you ever heard a sermon start like this before? (*laughter*) Now remember, I will be wanting a job at the end of this sermon, so it's going to get better. (*laughter*)

But I don't think that we really deal with our fear if we don't look head-on at it. I don't think we do ourselves any favor by running away from fear, because ultimately, we all have to turn and face it. So I wanted to do that, and I think the earlier we do, the easier that task is. Karl Marx also had a few criticisms of religion (*laughter*). He said it's an opiate, which was the pain killer that you would use. His view was that life can be so painful and hard that we sometimes need something to blunt the pain, and he thought that was the purpose of religion.

Well, I had not heard any of that kind of thing, so what I did - just trying to put my mind at ease - was to make a list of my heroes in life. I'd heard so many views of what religion is, that I thought surely the answer must be in those people that lived the way human beings should live. So surely if I make a list of the people I admire most, and then look at what their religion was, that should give some kind of direction or path – you might try that sometime.

On my list – I can't remember it all – but it was Ghandi, Schweitzer, Martin Luther King...and what I discovered was that they all had very similar religions. The one thing you couldn't say

about them was that it was an escape from fear. Every one of the people on my list felt religion calling them *into* their fears – calling them to face their fears. I mean, you can't say that Gandhi was running away from fear - or he wasn't very effective, let's put it like that... Martin Luther King... These were people who, if anything, were more courageous than most of us. And their religion was a part of that.

Well, we're looking at two passages today which are very much in tension with one another. The Proverbs passage that says that "fear of God is the beginning of wisdom." Most people that I know don't like to hear something like that. "Fear of God is the beginning of wisdom" sounds like something you'd use to scare somebody into mindlessness. Then, on the other side is a passage that seems to contradict that: it says "Love casts out fear, and if you have perfect love, (which means mature love), then you don't have fear," which kind of goes too far in the other direction, too. Scripture tends to do that: it over-paints it so that you can get kind of a sense – gets you out of your comfort zone where you can look at life in new ways.

Obviously, religion can do either one of those things. There are religions that are based primarily on fear of life. And when we discover new things about the world, like Galileo's discovery, or Darwin's discoveries, these religions *panic*... because the discoveries of science then threaten that comfortable world view that's based on escaping from somebody's anger. I would suggest that most mainstream religions have not escaped that gravity field of fear-based religion. That, still, fear of hell, fear of something...fear of pain, fear of death, something...is still that native energy of most religion. But it's pretty clear to see that a religion of fear has certain results, and religion that's seeking love and contact and compassion has a very different path that it's going to walk. Now, how is it possible that religion can go – the same text can be understood as calling us to either one of those paths?

Another thing that I fell in love with in college, (which y'all have had to listen to for 30 years), is a love of primates... of which we are examples. And I think part of the fascinating discoveries of Darwin is that we understand our spirituality much more when we see ourselves on the tree of life. One of the things you know about primates – or you're about to know – is that there are two types of bondings that are going to take place. One is called *igonic* – and that is, if two monkeys attack a third monkey, they will be good friends for a while: that when you join together in mutual aggression, that creates a bond, and it's a very powerful, short-term bond... so classmates that make fun of the teacher get really close until they graduate, and then they kind of drift apart. People that come together as war buddies and are so close, very often once the war is over, drift away from one another – if they don't become a different kind of friend.

Then the other kind of bond is called *hedonic*, which is the nurturing bond. It's nowhere near as strong in the short-run, but it can last a lifetime. Jesus came to teach us hedonic bonding – bonding from compassion, bonding from nurture. But every one of us has both of those possibilities in us, and actually a third possibility. On the flip-side of fear is not love; it's hope. And there are religions of hope as well – that just tell you, "Ignore pain, ignore danger, and just focus on the good things, and they'll come your way." How's that worked for ya? (*laughter*) That's also kind of a half truth. Love is in the middle of those.

Have you ever played peek-a-boo with a baby? You see that continuum there very easily when you play peek-a-boo. When you are trying to get the interest of a baby, if you're too far back, the baby doesn't care: you're furniture. (*laughter*) If you get too close, you frighten the baby, and they get scared and panic. The fun part is in the middle there; it's a balance. And to realize that *your* awareness is tied to those two ends – one end is fear, and the other is hope or desire –

and that spirituality is living *with* both of those *in balance* – it’s a different way of looking at things.

When Plato defined courage, he said it can’t just be getting in control of our fear; it must also [be to] get in control of our desires...fascinating sense that there’s a balance that needs to take place between our hopes and our fears. Isn’t it interesting how our political choices are between fear (there’s a villain under every rock), and hope, (just hope, no plan, just hope) (*laughter*)... because that’s the natural place for us to go, and we just alternate between the candidates. The gutter ball to this side, then the gutter ball to that side. (*laughter*)

What the proverb is saying is... not that fear – being afraid of God – is a good thing, but beginning with our fears is the beginning of all true wisdom: understanding your fear - understanding what you’re afraid of in life. You’ll have hundreds of examples of it, but can you follow those branches to what is the basic fear? What are you running from? What are you afraid to look at? That’s what the passages, I think, are calling us to look at...Is it fear of a job? Losing security? Not having enough money? Do you dream of yourself in a dumpster, without a paycheck coming in? It can be fear of disease: you don’t even realize that ‘til you go to a doctor, and they say, “There’s something growing in you; it’s probably nothing, but let’s talk about it in a month,” and you can’t get it out of your head. And it doesn’t have to be you; it can be somebody you care about...fear in relationship...what do those fears represent? What the passages are saying is: We can spend our entire lives running from fear, and fear will govern the rest of our choices. Or we can *turn*, and *understand* the fear, and have it be transformed into an energy.

When I’m giving speeches, if I’m not a little nervous, I get nervous then. (*laughter*) I like to be a little bit on edge – a little bit afraid – but when I first started off, the fear was *debilitating*. I was afraid of failure. And I was on the docket with another, very good, speaker, and she kind of leans over and says, “Do you want to stop being afraid of speaking?” and I said “Yeah!” and she says, “You never want to be afraid again?” and I said, “Yeah!” and she said, “Stop thinking about yourself, and think about what you have to say”...which stung. (*laughter*) But it was *wonderful!* From then on, I know: you put the fear in throttle. You don’t turn it into an object that you’re afraid of.

Steven King - this is the last of the witnesses for the prosecution (*laughter*) - believed that all fear is of death – that if you take all the fears that we have, ultimately the shape of it is a body under a sheet. And the body is you. That ultimately, all the fears that he uses in all of his horror movies come back to that fear.

What I want to respectfully suggest is: I think those critics are wrong...and I’m basing this on my years in ministry – being with people when they die. I do not believe the deepest fear that a human being has is of death. Not anymore. The deepest fear we have is of abandonment – of being disconnected. There are people who die very comfortably if they believe the sense of *connection* is not at stake. There are people who try to be safe by disconnecting from other people. There are nations – I can even think of maybe some nations that do that, too – that trust in their weapons and get stronger and stronger, and the people just get more and more afraid. Why is that?

If our greatest fear is death, then our current direction makes a lot of sense – if the greatest fear is death. But if the greatest fear is of disconnection, we’ve got to turn the boat around! Think about that: if your deepest fear is not that you will die, but that you’re alone, then very often our

defense mechanisms don't make any sense. If we're most afraid of death, then we should cut off relationship with each other, because that makes us safer. The more we can make our world look like a prison, the safer we will be. But the problem is, if that's wrong – if our fear comes from being disconnected, then there's no wall *high enough* to insulate us from what we're really afraid of. And there's no weapon *strong enough*, and no leaders *smart enough*, and we get stronger and stronger... there's a poem that says, "The stronger the weapon, the greater the fear." If your greatest fear is of being disconnected – if your views of death are actually fears of abandonment – of separation, of disconnection, and I think they are – my views of death were always of my little spirit hovering over the nothingness and watching it – you know, being in a box, underground, with dirt on your face, (*laughter*)... it's cold at night and you're under the ground, and you're sitting there watching that – it's a very terrifying thought. We shouldn't put people in boxes when they die! We sure shouldn't show that to children. (*laughter*) If the real security is in our connectedness, then we need to find the *courage* to *risk* our *lives* sometimes – our comfort, our things, our reputation – to keep connected, with life and with each other.

Our passage says that the greatest love a person can have is that they lay down their life for another. Does that sound like it's borne of fear? When [those in the] early church were called to be witnesses – which is also the word for "martyr" – to be human being, to not cooperate with violence and with oppression, does that sound like an escape from pain or danger? On the contrary. On the contrary. For many people, religion *can be* a vital lie that they tell themselves. But it can also be a vital *truth*: that love is stronger than death, and that we need to stop fearing death and hold on to love. For many people, religion can be an opiate – it can be a deadener of pain. But there are also images of people opening up their chest willing to feel whatever pain is necessary to stay in connection. Religion can be a vital truth that whatever pain we experience in loving is worth it.

And finally, it's true that religion is lipstick that is painted on a corpse. But for others, it is a call into life – an unwillingness to be disconnected, even to the point of death...an unwillingness to be defined by nation, religion, status, or anything that disconnects us from the whole. Religion in its fullness – love when it's mature – is a call, and begins with fear because that's where we have to start as human beings. But that's the first word; it's not the last word. The beginning of wisdom is fear. But the *fullness* of love has no fear. I hope, when you take up religion next time, you will hear it as a *call* – to add your name to that list of people who were not defined by their fears – that would risk any danger, any pain – to stay connected. I hope you will hear religion calling you *from* fear of God *to* courage to love.

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