

FEAR AND LOVING

2 John 1: 7-11

3 John 1: 9-14

1 John 4: 18-21

[Augsburg College Chapel, 25 January 2010, Epiphany 4]

“We are still a fretful nation.” So writes University of Southern California sociology professor Barry Glassner recently, commenting on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of his book, *A Culture of Fear*, which explored why Americans are so fearful of unlikely dangers. We live in perpetual anxiety, he argues, and we cast about for ways to overcome our fears. There is a literary tradition of sorts around responses to fear. 19th century Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard penned *Fear and Trembling*, his analysis of the existential human condition in the presence of the divine. A century later, gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson, looked around and wrote a series of *Fear and Loathing* books (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is perhaps his best known), his provocative essays on the sense of anomie and meaninglessness in American culture. And, as Glassner points out in his review of our fears, lately we’ve tried to address our anxiety and fear by focusing on individual cases (an example he uses is how we psychologize ‘road rage’) rather than seeking more durable social solutions (like addressing horrific commutes and traffic congestion).

I think we all can recognize fear as a powerful force in human nature. We are creatures who fear from our earliest moments of life – afraid of the dark, of spiders, of heights, of being alone, of being with others, and so on. But, as my literary sources argue, this is about a good bit more than the fear of surroundings, this is fear in our souls and in our natures. And because we fear so deeply, we must seek ways to alleviate the fear that are substantial, that allow us to go on with our lives. This isn’t about simply turning on the light in the dark. This is about trembling and escaping and loathing and psychologizing in response to and as a means to overcome the fear in our lives.

I’ve been thinking a good bit about fear in our souls these past few weeks as I prepare to lead a Bible study tomorrow at a gathering of church leaders who are meeting to explore what the church and faithful people might do to combat racism. And I’ve begun to recognize, both from my preparatory reading and from the recent circumstances in our neighborhood and world, that racism and fear are inextricably bound up together. Racism is individual and institutional fear of the other, of difference, of the stranger who represents a race or culture or language that I don’t understand, that I fear. And what I do when I feel this fear is to seek responses that help me feel better. I ignore, I tremble, I loathe, I perpetrate violence, I use the familiar to put down the stranger.

The trouble is that the fear that is racism is not relieved in our souls or in our communities when we respond in these typically human ways. We are afraid of those differently colored than we are but our typical responses seem to have exacerbated and

extended the fear rather than relieved it. I've been struck by some of the commentary about the earthquake in Haiti and how in its aftermath we are reminded of how our fear of otherness, of this nation borne of slaves, has led to the systematic oppression of these good people – and this despite the remarkable efforts of NGOs and courageous individuals who have fought the good fight there for years to make life better for Haitian people. We must go back to the original acts of racism and fear that stripped that country of its natural resources and left its people to generations of poverty and degradation.

Even here at Augsburg, we must face up to the racism and fear that insinuates itself into our common lives – even as we celebrate the remarkable diversity we have gained in our student body, we must admit that we still respond out of fear when faced with genuine otherness. Individually and institutionally we have yet to face our fears and the conflict they will inevitably occasion to know and practice what it means to not be afraid, to seek not to escape or loathe or tremble in our fear, but to find the capacity to live together as strangers.

I want to suggest that there is a worthy ancestor of this literature about responses to fear in the writer of what are called the Johannine epistles in the New Testament. The author, let's call him John – no one really knows exactly who wrote the letters – argues that the only way to overcome fear is by loving. Fear and loving.

In these three brief letters, we find John seeking ways to respond to the fears he sees in the early Christian community, fears that are about otherness – differences in practices and life experiences and expectations – fears that lead to disunity. It is fairly clear that John doesn't know exactly what to do.

A bit of exegesis is in order. The three Johannine epistles appear in a particular order, fronted by first John, which is a substantive and fairly philosophical essay on the spiritual life and overcoming our fears. But I am convinced by certain Biblical scholars that we can't read 1 John without first reading 2 and 3 John, both of which are very brief comments on the situation facing the community.

We read them this morning in an unusual order. In 2 John, the author writes to select members of the community, suggesting that the deceit and evil that they find in others leads to a straightforward response: separate yourself from these people whom you know to be unworthy, do not welcome these evildoers in your house. In his third letter, John seems to admit that the disunity in the community is intractable and that he needs to come and address the community personally.

And so we come back the first letter, in which it seems that John never was able to visit and so he needed to write down what to do in response to the fear the community was experiencing. And his recommendations are quite remarkable as we read summarized in this morning's text from 1 John 4.

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. Those who say ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” (1 John 4: 18-21)

To overcome this fear that has broken our community, John says we must...

- Accept that all of creation comes from our gracious and loving God – a theological claim – this is how God intends for God’s people to live (a new commandment aimed not at punishing, which is what fear demands, but instead as the moral contours of a good community – fear is about punishment, but God is about a beloved community). Our faithful response to the fear of otherness is, above all, to place our fear in the arms of our loving and awesome God. What would it mean for us to lay our racism right here at this altar, to admit our fear and then to ask what God is doing in our midst to show us a new way to live together? (Example at Our Saviour’s in naming not only the victims we pray for, but also the perpetrators.)
- See these diverse brothers and sisters – name them and their gifts, calls and accountability in our midst – personally, my story of our “Asian” kids, naming their otherness is a first step to accepting that otherness and learning to love them – socially, Jane Addams and her maps and papers, knowing our diverse neighbors so that we can learn to live together. What would it mean for us to truly see those who are different than we are, to engage them as fellow travelers? Perhaps our racism – which is often aimed at the abstract “other” – would begin to break down if we talked with each other with genuine openness and interest. (Example of intergroup dialogue projects at Augsburg.)
- Love these diverse brothers and sisters – not on our terms, but on theirs – this is not about minimizing our differences, that is an extension of our fear – instead it is about embracing who we are and who our neighbors are, and finding a new way ahead in love. I wonder if Professor Glassner is on to something when he suggests that our psychologizing of the dangers we perceive in our lives is a futile response to our fear. Instead, he suggests, we need to realize that our fears are often grounded in common needs and challenges – needs like safe schools and healthy neighborhoods and an engaged civic life – responses to which might be a much more fruitful (and I might add, loving) way to overcome our fears. Think about Haiti and the difference it might make if our responses there were less driven by the crisis of human and natural disasters, and more by our desire to create the sort of society we (and the Haitians) believe they deserve. Racism keeps the “other” down – it feeds off of and perpetuates fear. Love seeks to build up, to create the sort of world God intends for all God’s people.

It is really quite simple, John reminds God’s faithful people, “(T)hose who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” In our culture of fear, there is no more urgent and relevant Word. Thanks be to our loving God! Amen.