

1 Psychologist Melanie Greenberg describes these six attributes of courage: Feeling fear yet choosing to act; Following your heart; Persevering in the face of adversity; Standing up for what is right; Letting go of the familiar; and Facing suffering with dignity or faith.¹ As Christians, I'd add this definition of courage, "Choosing to see difficult choices or circumstances in the light of God's Word, acting in the strength, comfort, and purpose of God's Spirit, and intentionally living out and sharing the hope that comes through faith in Jesus." Wouldn't we all like more of that kind of hopeful courage in our lives and in the world?

Although we may put on a brave front, many of us face portions of our lives like this child, too afraid to look away but also too afraid to look with both eyes open. God wants to free us from the fears that bind us and fracture our world. For the next month, we'll explore some of the vexing fears we face in America, in a series inspired by the book of the same title by Adam Hamilton, pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection.² Whatever fears and worries you're facing today, hear the good news: God is well aware of what you're going through and more than able to equip you for the journey. God loves you, and God is offering you wisdom and strength for the scary times ahead.

2 It seems that from the youngest age, we're trained by our parents to be fearful of strangers. "Don't talk to strangers" used to be a common instruction given to our children before we sent them out the front door. Now it's more like, don't be Facebook friends with strangers. Who are the strangers, either real or imagined, that you're most afraid of?

I want you to be as honest with yourself as possible as I suggest some possibilities: Is it Muslims, homeless people, gays or transgendered people that spark fear in your heart? Bear in mind that sometimes our fears underlie our discomfort, anger, or antipathy for a group of people. Is it people with tattoos, face piercings, or ear gauges that make you afraid? Is it ISIS, AlQeda, or the kid next door who might become the next school shooter? Is it old people or young people? Is it people with cancer or HIV/AIDS? Is it conservatives or liberals, Democrats, Republicans, or Independents? Is it people who talk with a foreign

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-mindful-self-express/201208/the-six-attributes-courage>

² Adam Hamilton. *Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times*. Convergent (2018).

accent, speak a language you don't understand, or eat food that smells funny or downright awful? Is it brown people, yellow people, or white people that make you uncomfortable? Depending on where you live, where you grew up, and when you grew up, there was almost certainly some "other" group that you learned to fear, and possibly they learned to fear you. Christians and Muslims, for example, might have equal cause to be afraid of each other given the long history of conflict between the two groups.

To be sure, "stranger danger" is a real thing, like the horrific abduction and murder of Jacob Wetterling. There are clearly some sensible precautions we need to take with people we don't know, especially for the most vulnerable among us and especially in this age of cell phones and the internet. But like all our fears, we tend to let our fear of strangers run wild in our imaginations, leading to no end of harm to self and others. As followers of Jesus, fear was never meant to be the central principle for how we relate to God or to others. But don't take my word for it. Here's what the Apostle John had to say about it. I'm reading from 1John 4, in The Message.

{Read 1John 4:7-11, 18-21, MSG}

3 Nowhere is our fear of the other more on display than in the current discourse in the United States over immigration. Regardless of your political history or affiliation, I challenge you to see and hear this issue not from a "red" or "blue" perspective, but from a Biblical perspective. I want you to look beyond the question that's been put at the center of the debate, whether we should fund the construction of a border wall or fence concrete or steel. Instead, think about the underlying attitudes that seem to be reflected in the tweets and speeches we read about from all sides of the issue. In particular, think about your own heart. Are you afraid of the strangers crossing our borders? Are you more afraid of the strangers coming from the south than the north? How about the ones flying or shipping in from across the world?

In the earliest recorded law given to God's people on Mount Sinai, we read this: "So you, too, must show love to foreigners, for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt."³ In other words, by faith, we are descendants of those who at one time stood on

³ Deuteronomy 10:19, New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

the other side of the barbed wire. I find it more than a little ironic that it's not by faith alone that we're descended from immigrants. I've even spoken with first generation immigrants this year who have an astonishingly low level of empathy for the next generation of would-be immigrants. Why is that? Could it be fear of the other? Maybe fear of sharing resources and opportunity?

4 In the prophets that came after the Exodus from Egypt, we read things like this: “This is what the LORD says: Be fair-minded and just. Do what is right! ... Do not mistreat foreigners, orphans, and widows.”⁴ In other words, part of what God considers “just living” is the way we treat outsiders, the people on the other side of the fence, the people who we might have a hard time understanding and an inclination not to like or trust. To be completely candid, the Old Testament doesn't exactly have a uniform record on this. We have to acknowledge the difficult history of brutal conquest of strangers by force. Fortunately, we have the benefit of the Gospels to help us understand that loving our neighbor was the ethic God was leading us to all along.

In the Gospels, Jesus taught by example and word, saying, “I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home.”⁵ Even the scandalous genealogy of Jesus, given in Matthew 1, is a further testimony to God's love for the stranger, with such notorious outsiders as Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth, listed as the faithful ancestors of Jesus! International border checkpoints probably serve a useful function of governance, but ill-informed rhetoric that's fueled by fear is no way for us to live out the Gospel.

5 If you're interested in diving deeper into the theology and psychology of fear of the other, I recommend Bishop Will Willimon's excellent book, *Fear of the Other*.⁶ Willimon makes the eye-opening observation that it's actually us who were the original “others,” the enemies of God due to our own willful disobedience and prideful self-centeredness. God made the first moves in forgiving us and reconciling with us. As Christians, that basic fact should compel us to bring forgiveness and reconciliation to others, especially those we're most afraid of or at odds with. There's nothing meek or mild about the grace of Jesus Christ.

⁴ Jeremiah 22:3, Ibid.

⁵ Matthew 25:35, Ibid

⁶ William H. Willimon. *Fear of the Other: No Fear in Love*. Abingdon (2016).

It's radical and powerful. Just like Jesus, we're called to tear down the walls of our fear and act with the radical and powerful grace of Jesus.

6 I can't offer you any easy steps to overcome your fear of strangers, but the steps we talked about last week still apply. You can face your fears with faith by spending time reading, reflecting, and praying on God's word. You might want to read the Gospel of Luke again, which paints such a vivid picture of God's care for the outsider. You can examine your assumptions about the other in light of the facts. What do you really know about the other that you're afraid of? Do a little research, and if you can, get your information directly from the source rather than assuming the validity of someone else's spin. I've found that there's really no substitute for sitting down and having a conversation with someone you don't know and don't understand. That might be hard to do with someone who's views are very different than yours, but you can start by looking for the things you have in common, and then perhaps exploring the differences that you can learn to see as gifts.

7 Fear of the other is really nothing new. Every generation, in every place people are gathered, finds something about another group to fear. Sometimes our fears lead us to keep wise boundaries that protect us from criminal behavior. But too often our fears discourage us from living into our true selves, the loved and loving children of God, bearers of the mercy, forgiveness, grace, and love of Jesus Christ. I want to live more like that, and less like this Disney character from the movie, *Inside Out*.

I want to take you back now to the beginning of my message, when I asked you to honestly assess which strangers you're most afraid of. Try to get a picture in your mind of what that scary person might look like. Unless it's a specific person with a history of violent criminal behavior, I'm guessing that the fears you're holding in your heart won't hold up to a careful examination of all the facts, and a patient and prayerful reading of God's Word. Here me now, I'm not suggesting that you put yourself in harm's way, but is there a way for you to sit down and share a cup of coffee this week with someone you're afraid of? If not, is there a way to learn more about a group of people you're afraid of that could help you to see more clearly the image of God reflected in their lives? Maybe the best place to start would be to simply sit with God in prayer, confessing your fears, and asking God to give you an extra measure of the courageous and hopeful love you have inherited by faith.



Buffalo United Methodist Church



...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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