

1 Have you ever gotten a speeding ticket? I think the last time I got a speeding ticket was when I was 18, driving home from a camping trip. I must have been driving 75 mph back when 35W was posted at 55 mph. Now hear me, I'm not saying that I haven't been guilty of speeding in all these years since then, I'm just saying that I've rarely been pulled over and only once given a ticket. Well, on Christmas Eve I got pulled over while driving on Highway 34 on my way to the Christmas Eve service here. Do you know that feeling you get when you see the police car, either parked or coming toward you in the opposite lane? Your eyes go to the speedometer and then back to the road to see if the lights are going to come on? Well, I saw the lights come on, and as the squad car slowed and did a u-turn, I pulled onto the shoulder and resigned myself to receiving a ticket. But that's not what happened. Even though I admitted my speed (about 68 mph), the officer told me to slow down but didn't give me a ticket. Grace prevailed. I definitely deserved a ticket.

Why is it that our pulses start to race when we see police lights behind us on the road? Isn't it usually because we're afraid of getting caught, afraid of getting a ticket? While it's true that some people in our country are afraid of getting beaten or shot when they get pulled over, for most of us it's really a matter of facing the embarrassment and consequences of our guilt. And so whenever we get behind the wheel, unless we're scrupulously observing the speed limit, coming to a complete stop at stop signs, and never racing through a yellow light, there's always a corner of our mind that flinches when we see a police car.

I wonder how many of us live with the same attitude toward God. Even though we've been told over and over again about the depth and breadth of God's love, do we experience that love viscerally, in the gut, when we know we're guilty and afraid of getting caught? This morning we're continuing our worship series "Life Beyond Belief," by taking on our fear of God

2 Let's be honest and say that the Bible contains some very upsetting images of God's judgment and ensuing wrath, in both Old and New Testaments. It would be disingenuous to go no further in our understanding of God than to simply say "Jesus love me." Jesus does love us, but that divine love is considerably more complex than our own understanding of

love. Jesus himself said that he had come, not to abolish God's law but to fulfill it.¹ C.S. Lewis famously said, "What do people mean when they say, 'I am not afraid of God because I know He is good'? Have they never even been to a dentist?"² Is it possible to both fear God and love God, to be aware of God's judgement of our sin and at the same time eagerly walk with and serve God? We're continuing our reading of the Gospel of Luke, beginning with the twelfth chapter today in the New Living Translation.

{Read Luke 12:1-7, NLT}.

3 Of all the images of God one could come up with, a dentist seems to be one of the least likely. But let's look at Lewis's metaphor for a moment. For obvious reasons, most of the pictures of dentists and their patients that are posted on the internet show everyone smiling, as if a trip to the dentist ranked on par with a birthday party. Let's be honest- a trip to the dentist is at least uncomfortable. I have yet to meet someone who eagerly anticipates having their teeth and gums scraped and prodded with sharp metal instruments. But dentists are good, and a trip to the dentist generally brings us comfort and healing- at least, in the long run.

Sometimes in our rush to defend God's character, we gloss over the fact that God hates sin, even more than your dentist hates cavities and periodontal disease. Your dentist will tell you that failing to brush your teeth will lead to cavities, untreated cavities will lead to a root canal, untreated root decay will lead to a pulled tooth, and a pulled tooth will lead to a bridge or an implant, each succeeding treatment becoming more complex, more expensive, and generally more unpleasant. Does that mean you should fear your dentist? Not really. But it does mean that you should take seriously the warnings given to you about proper oral hygiene, because there will be painful consequences if you don't.

In the same way, our sin tends to escalate from little interior attitudes and thoughts into larger behaviors that begin to entangle more and more people in the sin and its consequences. So perhaps "fearing" God can mean actively and passionately avoiding bringing that kind of pain into our lives and the lives of those around us.

4 In today's passage from Luke, we see both the judgment of God and the compassion

¹ Matthew 5:17

² C.S. Lewis (2012). "A Grief Observed", p.22, Faber & Faber

of God on display in the words of Jesus. Jesus is warning about hypocrisy, one of the more prevalent cavities of the soul in the time of Jesus and probably still today. But Jesus also warns about trying to keep our sins secret. When Jesus returns, everything hidden, everything secret, will be brought to light. In a sense, Jesus is warning us that even though we haven't been issued a ticket yet, there is coming a day when we'll all be pulled over and every violation we've committed against the law of love will be cited.

Thankfully, that's not the end of the message! How could we bear to carry the weight of the knowledge of the many ways we've fallen short of Christ's image, moving through each day with one eye in the rear-view mirror, anxiously hoping that we're not the ones who will be pulled over next? That's not the kind of "fear" of God we're meant to live with.

Jesus changed everything, but not by taking away the demands of God's law that we love God and love one another. Jesus changed everything by dying on a cross and accepting the penalty of our sin for himself. Does that mean we have, in effect, diplomatic immunity, that we're free to drive through life however we like and disregard any traffic laws? The Apostle Paul would say to that, "By no means!"³ We have to decide to make room in our lives for the forgiveness of Jesus by doing the hardest thing possible- by surrendering control of our lives and letting Jesus take the wheel. That's not a simple thing to, but the best way to avoid getting a moving violation on the Kingdom of God highway is to trust in God's Spirit to keep you in the right lane.

5 Much has been made of the so-called fight or flight response that human beings take in the face of fear. Fear has immediate and long-term physiological consequences for our bodies. The wrong kind of fear of God, the kind that leads us to fight or flight, has immediate and long-term spiritual consequences. Theologian Brennan Manning wrote, "The sorrow of God lies in our fear of Him, our fear of life, and our fear of ourselves. He anguishes over our self-absorption and self-sufficiency... God's sorrow lies in our refusal to approach Him when we sinned and failed."⁴

Have you ever had a child, grandchild, student, or even a friend try to cover up or hide something they've done that's wrong or hurtful, avoiding having a face-to-face conversation

³ Romans 6:15, NIV (2011)

⁴ Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging*, p. 4.

with you at all costs? We tend to avoid conflict, and we let our fear of dealing with the tough stuff drive us into hiding. We're tempted to try the same thing with God when our fear of God rules our lives instead of our love of God. Jonah tried it, Elijah tried it, I've tried it, and each of us has probably tried it at some point in our lives. Maybe you're running from God even now. The thing is, it doesn't work. All you get from running from God is scared and tired out, running in the opposite direction of the open arms of God, who wants nothing more than to restore you by the atoning blood of Jesus and the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit. Is that a painful process? It can be. So don't wait until your spiritual cavities turn into abscesses of your soul. Abba is calling you to return and be restored.

6 It's a sobering fact that children tend to form their view of God in part based on their relationships with the authority figures in their lives. Those of us who are teachers and parents and friends to children bare an extra measure of responsibility in modelling what a healthy "fear" of God is. It's hard, if not impossible, for us to do that if we ourselves live in fear of our creator, redeemer, and sustainer.

As followers of Jesus, we have to read everything in the Bible in light of the profound act of loving atonement offered us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Do you remember what atonement is? "At-one-ment." God wants "at-one-ment" with us, in the same way that a parent aches to have their wayward child return to their loving embrace. God isn't in the business of setting up speed traps, lurking behind billboards or bushes and waiting to catch us speeding. But neither does God want us to hurl ourselves forward on the highway of life, swerving in and out of traffic, risking our lives and the lives around us.

Every faith-stretching journey toward a transformed life begins with one small step. So here are some questions for you to ponder this week and, if you're bold enough, to have a conversation about with someone else. Are you afraid of God? What are you afraid of? What can you do today to accept more fully the forgiveness of Jesus that leads to at-one-ment with God, letting the perfect love of God drive out all fear?

Please pray with me. *Savior, teacher, healer, and friend. Forgive our hard hearts, heal our scarred hearts, and replace our fear of your judgement with a burning desire to grow in holiness of heart and life. Amen.*



Buffalo United Methodist Church



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

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