

Fearless: Why Are We Afraid? Sunday, 4/18/21

We are as a matter of biology and psychology, emotional beings. Our brains were designed to do a great many amazing things, including the processing of feelings, information, sights, and sounds. Like any complex systems, there are trade-offs in how our brains work. Our fear response is a great example.

The parts of the brain most immediately involved in our experience of fear are small areas located in the center of our brains: The amygdala and the thalamus. These are the parts of the brain most immediately associated with what we've all heard called the "fight or flight" response. Because it takes a relatively long time for us to rationally assess whether a situation is dangerous, these parts of the brain have the authority to do what has been termed an "Amygdala Hijack," bypassing the rational parts of the brain for the sake of executing a speedy response to whatever it is that we perceive is threatening us.¹ The amygdala releases stress hormones to prepare the body to fight or take flight and triggers the adrenal glands to release adrenaline. Rapid breathing, accelerated heart rates, butterflies in the stomach, dilated pupils, and tunnel vision are all familiar experiences when the body decides you're in danger and begins to marshal a chemical defense.²

Sometimes this fear response helps us out. Running out of a burning building might be the best response we could make, unless, of course, we're a fire fighter charged with going into the burning building to rescue others. Sometimes fear holds us back from taking unwise risks, like running across a highway at night. But mostly, it seems that our fear is an impediment to living well, even if it does sometimes help to keep us alive.

There's a difference between what we normally mean by "fear" and what we call "phobias." Phobias produce extreme reactions that are out of proportion to the reality of the threat and interfere with the ability to function. For example, very few people living in Minnesota have a real need to be afraid of being seriously hurt by a spider, but quite a few of us are afraid of them. Fortunately, these kinds of phobias are usually pretty easy to overcome with counseling.

On the other hand, there's a much broader and insidious battle that all face with every-

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amygdala_hijack

² <https://totalwellnessmagazine.org/articles/the-biology-of-fear>

day fears: Fear of being alone or lonely; Fear of people from different cultures; fear of running out of money; fear of violent crime; social anxieties, like the fear of being misunderstood or rejected. The list could go on and on. What are the things that you're most afraid of? Not the silly, irrational phobias, but the situations you may very well encounter in the course of your day, week, month, or year?

Max Lucado, in his book, *Fearless*, points out that it's unlikely that we can be both happy and afraid at the same time. The same goes for clear-thinking and feeling afraid, confident and feeling afraid, and even being merciful and feeling afraid.³ And yet, like the disciples on the stormy sea of Galilee, our automatic response to threatening situations is usually one of fear instead of faith. What if we could turn that around?

Among the harmful byproducts of our fear, Lucado lists these: Our fears sow doubt in our hearts about the character of Jesus; they "corrode our confidence in God's goodness...And...turns us into control freaks," leading us to try to micromanage external factors in our lives when the better solution would be to manage our own responses to the things we really can't control.⁴

Fortunately for us, God has hardly been silent on the topic of our fear. As Max Lucado points out, Jesus is recorded in the Bible as instructing the disciples with the words "Do not fear" more than twice as often as he repeated the great commandments of "love God" and "love your neighbor."⁵ In fact, all of the Scriptures are filled with God's wisdom regarding how we are to live in the face of our fears. To help you out, I've put together a set of what I'm calling "Fearless Flash Cards," a set of thirty short Bible passages that will remind you why you need not be afraid. You'll find them included in the email that was sent out on Friday with the BUMC Weekly Connection. You can also find them on our web site or in the church office. You can use the fearless flashcards in just about any way you like. I've been keeping the three pages together at my desk and have been simply reading through them periodically to remind myself of God's goodness and character. Even better, if you want a chance to short-circuit that amygdala hijack behind your fear response, try using

³ Max Lucado. *Fearless: Imagine Your Life Without Fear*, p. 5. Thomas Nelson (2009).

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 9.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 10.

them as memory flashcards. When we plant God’s word in our hearts and minds through memorization, God’s Holy Spirit has a way of bringing them to our attention when we most need them.

Let’s take a deeper dive into one of those flashcards now as we hear from Paul’s second letter to Timothy. I’m reading from chapter 1, beginning with verse 1, in the New Living Translation. [{Read 2Timothy 1:1-11 NLT}](#)

The Fearless Flashcard verse from that passage comes from verse 7: “God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.”⁶ It’s always a good idea to pay attention to the details of what’s grouped together and what’s contrasted in verses like these. Paul writes that fear and timidity are travelling companions. When we let fear govern our hearts, it lets the wind out of our sails as far as living boldly for Jesus. I don’t know anyone who really want to live that kind of life, curled up on the cold floor in fear and timidity.

Notice what Paul contrasts with fear and timidity: Power, love, and self-discipline. We spent the season of Lent learning about the Jesus way of self-giving love, and we know and believe as John wrote, that “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.”⁷ So one very obvious strategy for living a more fearless life is to make more room in our lives for love, both receiving love and giving it. I invite you to think right now about something you’re afraid of in your life, then ask yourself, “Where is there love to give or receive in this situation?” Is there one small act or adjustment in my attitude that would allow me to receive or offer more love? Filling our lives with Godly love leaves that much less room for fear to get a foothold. But that doesn’t come automatically, does it? The power to give and receive love comes from God’s Spirit and God’s Word. Self-discipline is how we receive that power. That’s exactly what Paul means when he writes to Timothy in the preceding verse, “[F]an into flames the spiritual gift God gave you.”⁸ We fan into flames the Spirit of God when we conscientiously and eagerly practice self-discipline in our spiritual lives.

For all you budding physics students, you might recall that Newton’s First Law of

⁶ 2Timothy 1:7. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

⁷ 1John 4:18. English Standard Version.

⁸ 2Timothy 1:6. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

Motion states that “every object will remain at rest or in uniform motion in a straight line unless compelled to change its state by the action of an external force.”⁹ Another word for that is “inertia,” and I believe it applies to human behavior as well as the movement of physical objects in the world. Nobody suddenly wakes up one morning and decides to begin serving others in love without something happening to them first, although people like Paul have had sudden and powerful conversions to the Jesus way of love. For most of us, the inertia of habit and preference tends to keep us on the same path we were on yesterday. If that’s a fearless path of love, then so much the better! But if it’s a fearful and timid path that isn’t marked by love, we need to begin taking small steps in the right direction, training ourselves in the holy lives that Paul tells us we’ve been called to. The Fearless flashcards are one place you might start. Another helpful discipline might be to recall and celebrate those moments that you’ve managed to be fearless. As Max Lucado points out, fear tends to cause us to forget past victories. To that end, I invite you to share with me photos or even videos about a time you were fearless. That might be something spectacular, like jumping out of an airplane or donating an organ, or it might be something small, like trying Brussel Sprouts for the first time. Just pick something, send me a picture, and tell me a few details to explain the picture. If you want to remain anonymous, tell me that as well.

But no amount of self-discipline can free us from fear without the power of God that’s been revealed in the grace of Jesus Christ. That’s why Paul reminds us of the resurrection in verse 10, and why we need to daily re-center ourselves in the reality of Easter morning. Jesus, Paul wrote, “broke the power of death and illuminated the way to life and immortality through the Good News.”¹⁰ We are Easter People, called to live in the power, love, and self-discipline that comes from remembering that Christ has risen, and because Jesus has risen, we can live each day as if we had been born anew!

Please join me now in reading this litany to be fearless people: We are Easter People, delivered from the fear of death! Therefore, we will be: Fearless when facing people who aren’t like us, choosing to love them instead of fearing them; Fearless when facing our flaws and criticisms, remembering that we are approved as God’s Children; Fearless when facing

⁹ <https://www.grc.nasa.gov/www/k-12/VirtualAero/BottleRocket/airplane/newton.html>

¹⁰ 2Timothy 1:10. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

injustice in this world, confident that God's righteousness will prevail; Fearless when sharing our faith, believing that our witness is a blessing to others. We choose this day to live in the light and power of the resurrection. Amen!

Please take some time now to reflect on your commitment to grow in fearless living for God.



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