

Love Over Fear

Hebrews 13:1-6, John 12:1-8

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Something that some of you may not know about me is that I like to participate in drum circles. I own a djembe drum made in Gambia that I received as a gift for my 50th birthday a couple of years ago, and have found a Friday night percussion jam that I attend as often as I can. I took some lessons on the drum when I was on sabbatical – I can't say that I am a talented drummer, but I know my way around a rhythm and have fun doing it. Drumming can be really meditative and (for me, anyway) spiritual. That was one of the reasons I asked for a drum for a significant birthday – I wanted to take up something that would open up new communities and friendships, as well as a new pathway for possible experiences of the Divine.

Sometimes a drum circle is exactly that. When the beat settles, and everyone is focused on making the music and something beautiful emerges from this disparate group of people, something transcendent happens. There are times when I feel enveloped in God's heartbeat. To be honest, though, it's not always like that. The drum circle is always fun and energizing, but some experiences are more mystical than others. Once in a while someone attends who doesn't seem to want to be there, or we can't seem to jell together as musicians, or whatever. But at least at the circle I go to, there is a prevailing attitude that the group that assembles on any particular Friday night is the group that was supposed to be there at that moment in time and that whatever happens is just the way things are. The first time I walked in I didn't know a soul there, and was welcomed. That was important.

I had to remember that hospitality my own self a few weeks ago when my son Greer and I spent the evening at the drum circle. I now know a number of the participants and was happy to see

them, as we hadn't been in several weeks. And then here came the new guy – new to me anyway. At this percussion circle, drums are not the only instruments. Our leader, Stream, has a vast collection of instruments from all over the world – shakers, wooden flutes, xylophones, everything you can think of. If you get tired of drumming, you can just pick up something else and jam for a short while. Some people bring instruments of their own – which is what the deal was with the new guy. He had brought this odd electronic instrument – sort of like a guitar, but the wooden part was teardrop shaped, and it plugged into a small amplifier. It was called a bouzouki. This guy was wearing an odd finger covering and would run his finger up and down the frets and when it was plugged in it would make this awful squawking noise. He was also having trouble getting his teeny tiny amplifier squared away, so on the regular it would sort of shriek. Or, we would be trying to figure out what we were going to play next, and he would be tuning his bouzouki strings. Bouzoukis have A LOT of strings.

I'm not exactly proud of this, but I started feeling resentful. "I haven't been here in weeks, and I want to make some good music. Here this guy comes in sounding like a scalded cat. Can't he take his bouzouki somewhere else?"

But guess what happened next? He finally got his amplifier all squared away, Stream started a cool rhythm that we joined in with on the drums, and it really sounded pretty good. Once the bouzouki was all tuned up, it really did add something to the ensemble. I felt a little bit ashamed of myself for being such a jerk, so quick to judge, so certain that something *different* from what I'm used to was going to make for a lesser experience. I realized, again, as I so often do at the drum circle, that we are more together than we are apart.

That's kind of a mundane example of how we sometimes think and behave as flawed and broken

human beings, but it really made me think. I can't say that I was *afraid* in that situation, but I was petty and judgmental for a brief time. If the stakes had been higher – if I had felt like my livelihood was threatened or my family was in some kind of danger because of this stranger's behavior, my emotions would have escalated much more quickly. And yet...after we had played the music and had a few minutes just to chat and get acquainted, he was a really nice person and I was glad to have met him. I know his name now. If he and his bouzouki are missing from the circle, I miss them.

I think one of the reasons that scenario has stuck with me is my concern that, as a society, we are forgetting how to welcome people...especially people we do not fully understand. As a species, when we humans feel threatened in some way, we want to have someone or something to blame. We want to point to some phenomenon and say "This. This is why. If we undo this, everything will go back to normal." Because of that predilection, there are groups who get scapegoated and treated unfairly. In the worst possible scenario, we wind up with concentration camps and gas chambers. We must know at the core of our being that dehumanization of the neighbor is not what God is calling us to, and yet it still happens. We have to figure out a way to do better, to be the people God created us to be.

That's where the letter to the Hebrews can be helpful. We've looked at Hebrews before and you may remember that it is ambiguous as far as timing and historical context. Virtually nothing of that is known with certainty. But maybe that is a good thing, because the book is filled with timeless truth, wisdom that transcends specific space and time and calls us to be the people of God wherever and whenever we are. Chapter 13, which we are looking at today is a list of closing thoughts – important instructions that the writer wants to be certain their audience

remembers. And what is at the top of that list? “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Instructions follow about ministering to prisoners and those who are tortured, marital fidelity, and fighting against greed. All important parts of a life of service to Christ. There is another admonition a few verses later that coordinates beautifully with the call to hospitality, verse 16: “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”

Maybe you noticed, as I did, the parameters of the verses we are looking at this morning. We start with “Let mutual love continue.” We end with “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?” It was that bracketing that led me to this morning’s title “Love Over Fear,” because I think we have to make that choice over and over again, through countless large and small decisions. Our natural instinct is to be afraid – and there are some good reasons for our fears. But God calls us over and over to consciously decide to act with love instead of fear. I do not hear the last words “What can anyone do to me?” as a promise that nothing bad will ever happen to us, or that everyone we meet is a good person who wishes us well. If you live long enough, you know that neither of those things are true. When we proclaim “What can anyone do to me?” we are affirming God’s desire that we live in relationship with each other. There is some risk involved with that, because there are some bad apples out there. But God promises to be with us through whatever trials we face. The rewards of living on this earth and recognizing the image of God in every other person we meet and understanding that we belong to each other – those rewards outweigh any risks associated with human sinfulness.

Let me say, again, how moved and delighted I am by the outpouring of support that you

all showed for our new refugee assistance ministry. Honestly, week before last it was like Christmas morning every time I opened my email and saw your messages about what needed items you would bring to be given to our neighbors. And then when you all started bringing the stuff, just the abundance of your generosity was overwhelming in the best kind of way.

Yesterday, several of us from St. Matthew accompanied our friends from Sligo Seventh-Day Adventist Church to deliver the supplies to the refugee families. I felt so strongly as we met the people and drank tea together and laughed with the children that, even with our differences, our lives enrich one another. I'm glad we are making this effort to show hospitality to local refugee families, and I give thanks to all of you for supporting that project.

As I think about the long-term future of our nation and our world, though, I still cannot see the whole path forward. As we seek to be faithful disciples through the social issues of our time, immigration is a major one. If you haven't seen it yet, I recommend that you pick up the April issue of *Atlantic* magazine. The cover story is about immigration and the current debates that it has stirred up in our society. I think the article is quite fair – the writer, David Frum, is an immigrant himself. He doesn't say that we should stop immigration, in fact he speaks highly of the ways that different cultures and customs enliven the fabric of our society and bring fresh ideas in technology, academics, and innovation. He points out that of the 122 Americans who won a Nobel prize of any kind between 2000 and 2018, 34 of them were immigrants. Frum also points out, though, that at current rates of immigration the US population will exceed 400 million in about 30 years. Whether we think that is a bad thing or a good thing, clearly some planning needs to be happening NOW about how we deal with that. There would need to be more hospitals, schools, and highways to accommodate that many more people. So in spite what

certain leaders would have us think, the whole issue is far more complex than just “Close the Border!” or advocating for totally open borders.

I’ve had some interesting conversations with a few of you as we have been looking at immigration over the past few weeks. Some of you have rightfully asked about current law, and whether or not Christians should disobey laws about immigration that they see as unjust. Again, those are complicated issues. As a general rule, followers of Christ make every effort to be good citizens. In Romans, chapter 13, the Apostle Paul reminded us that the state is created by God and that we are subject to its authority. I am no anarchist, and except for the occasional speeding ticket am a law-abiding citizen. I disagree with some of our current immigration policies and would like to elect leaders who approach the issue in a humane way, but I’m not advocating illegal activity.

There is also a traditional Presbyterian principle, though, that plays into these questions, and that’s that “God alone is Lord of the conscience.” Even though I don’t support illegal behavior, I really don’t concern myself with what someone’s status is if they show up at The Commons door asking for food. I don’t ask any of our members or visitors what their status is. That isn’t because I think they should be ashamed of who they are or how they got here, but because if they are in a situation where I can be of service to them, I want to help them and be able to truthfully say I did not know their status and it didn’t matter to me. Standing before me is a human being, a sister or a brother in Christ. Their basic needs for food, shelter, and love must be met.

There is a saying among psychologists who study decision making that sometimes all we can do is “the next right thing.” Social issues are complex, people are complicated, and we

cannot see the whole path forward. As someone who believes the realm of God is already in place, I can see the endpoint – but sometimes I despair wondering how we will get there and what to do to move us closer. So often, all I can do is the next right thing. Stopping at CVS to get toothpaste. Writing a letter for someone trying to move forward in becoming a citizen. Visiting refugees in their new homes and getting to know them a little bit. The next right thing. And I have a hunch that the next right thing will most often involve love and not fear.

Thanks be to God. Amen.