

Loving is Living Without Fear

Text: Luke 1:30; Matthew 1:20; Luke 2:10; I John 4:18

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

... Do not be afraid, Mary for you have found favor with God. Luke 1:30

*... Joseph ... do not be afraid to take Mary home with you as your wife...
Matthew 1:20*

*And the angel said to them [the shepherds], "Be not afraid; for behold I bring
you good news of a great joy ..." Luke. 2:10*

There is no room for fear in love; perfect love banishes fear. I John 4:18

If we did a little word association game and we were looking for pairs of opposites, and I said "black," you would probably say, "white," and if I said "hot," you would say, "cold," and if I said "war," you'd say, "peace," and if I said "love," you'd say, "hate." And you would be wrong. Love and hate seem like a pair of opposites, but when you really stop to think about it, it's not really love and hate, but love and fear.

That's an insight which has been brought to light by a psychiatrist named Gerald Jampolsky. He shared that on the Hour of Power, and it was an insight that Bob Schuller appreciated so much that he got to know Jerry Jampolsky and last year, in March, when we were on Maui at a theological conference with Bob Schuller, Jerry was there. I must say that he lives his creed. He's written a little book, *Love Is Letting Go Of Fear*. It's a simple book; it's almost a simplistic book. It has cartoon characters and bold-type declarations that one can memorize, but in spite of the fact that it seems like an elementary treatment, he does have hold of something, and there is a profound truth there. He has had, in his own experience, life transformation through the insight. On reflection, I got to thinking, "Well, Jerry, you're not so smart. The Apostle John in the First Century said that a long time ago!" He said there's no room for fear in love. Perfect love banishes fear. And so, what has been rediscovered in our day is simply an old truth, and, as a matter of fact, it's at the very heart of the Gospel; it is at the very root of what God has done for us at Christmas in the incarnation of the Word, in

the revelation of His glory in the face of Jesus Christ. The Christmas message, at its very core, says that loving is living without fear.

Love and fear, according to John, are mutually exclusive. Love and fear cannot coexist in the same heart. Well, I suppose our hearts are always living in a balance of love and fear, but to the extent that we are loving, we are not fearing, and to the extent that we are fearing, we are not loving. And the battle is to get hold of the insight of Christmas and begin to love and not fear. Loving is living without fear, and that is a life-transforming truth if we'd ever let it grip our souls.

We do have some control over the ingredients of our minds and the stuff of our life. We can make some conscious and deliberate choices, and those conscious and deliberate choices can be made, for a Christian, on the basis of a foundation of truth rooted in the Gospel, rooted in the Christmas Gospel. John says the greatest reality is that God is love. It is repeated over again in that fourth chapter - God is love. God is love. The ultimate reality is love. At the heart and center of things is love. Reality, history, human experience, the transcendent ground of everything is not love, among other things - it is love. That's John's grasp of the truth that he discovered in Jesus Christ. God is love.

And so, when he says that there is no room for fear in love, but rather that perfect love casts out fear, he is giving a very practical prescription for living and that prescription can really transform our human experience. At the heart and center of reality there is love, and he says that love came to manifestation. If you want next week's word, Epiphany, the word is in this text. God *showed* or God *manifested* His love to us in that He sent His son. Jesus was the gift of God by which he signaled to the world that He is love. The Gospel of Jesus is the good news that the heart of God is the heart of love, and that the great, basic, ultimate, final, supreme reality of everything, of human life and of the world and of the whole of the cosmic scope of things is love. That's the Christmas message. The Christmas message is meant to enable us to live with love and to be done with fear. That is very, very elemental; it speaks to the root of our problem. God displayed love that casts out fear.

I was rather surprised as I began to think about the story, this wonderful Christmas story that we've just lived through again. Mary gets a marvelous announcement from Gabriel. I suppose it would strike fear into one's heart. Gabriel's words to Mary were, "Mary, fear not. Fear not. Don't worry about the fact that you're engaged and the marriage hasn't been consummated. Don't worry about what the community will say. Don't worry about the fact that you might lose Joseph and lose everything and have all your dreams shattered."

Easy to say, Good Old Gabriel - "Don't be afraid." But that was his word, because that was Mary's problem. It's always our problem. We're always afraid. Who knows what this new year will bring? Sometimes we grow anxious. How will our new business do? How about the new practice we've just started? How about the new relationship we've just established? How about the new child in our home, or

grandchild? What about all the scary possibilities of this new year, in this world that is going with such a whirl, on its way, always teetering on the brink of disaster? Fear fills the human heart. "Don't be afraid, Mary."

And then, there's Joseph. Joseph is a decent sort of person. What will he do? Will he be willing to risk being made the laughingstock of the community? Will he expose Mary to that ridicule? Will he be so put off and offended at Mary? "Yeah, sure, Mary, a dove. I know, a dove." The angel comes and says, "Joseph, don't be afraid. Don't be afraid to take Mary." He would be afraid. Who wouldn't be afraid? And so the Word of God always has to come through His angelic messenger. "Don't be afraid."

And then this marvelous event is broadcast to the world, brought personally to shepherds. Good News! And what did the angels have to say? "Don't be afraid. Fear not. Good news of a great joy that shall be to all people. Settle down. Calm yourselves. Don't be afraid." It must be that there is something intrinsic, something at the very core of our being; there is something about being human that makes us react to life with fear. It's very elemental. It's a very primitive response to life. I suppose it's because of our connection with the whole animal kingdom, our connectedness with all of Creation, that survival instinct. Did you ever watch a bird in the grass looking for a worm, cocking its head, listening? I'm never sure if it's listening for a worm rattling down in the clay, or whether it's cocking its head to see if I have a slingshot in my hand. I think it's always worried about a BB gun. Here, there, all over the place. A parable of a human being. Always looking around for the next threat, the next attack.

Life is viewed as threatening, and people's relationship is often viewed as an attack, and we live our lives in an adversarial environment with others. Always feeling that we have something to protect, something to hold onto, something to possess, something to guard. Fear is a very primitive human response. So, all of our lives we go about being afraid and interpreting the behavior of others as an attack. And it happens all over the place.

Did you ever go in for a nice meal in a restaurant and the waitress begins by spilling your ice water over the table, pours hot coffee down your back, and snarls, "What do you want?" And you've just come in, expecting a pleasant evening with a waiter to be at your service, and he turns out to be grouchy, and so you say to the people with you, "Well, I'll fix him. We'll give him a little tip." (Don't leave out the tip completely, because then the waiter will interpret that as though you forgot to leave a tip.) Leave a quarter when it should have been a ten-dollar bill. That will get the message across. Then he'll know that I am saying to him that I am displeased with the service. And, of course, that will make his day, won't it? And maybe the man's wife was just laid off with the prospect of unemployment for months. Maybe his son was just taken to the Emergency Room, having been struck down with an automobile. Maybe he is about to go in for emergency surgery with a bleeding ulcer that's about to burst in the next two

or three hours, and maybe you were able to add to all the anxiety that will bring it to a head. We do it to each other all the time. Never stop to ask, "Why? Wow, that person must be struggling with something." Rather, we say, "Who do you think you are? And I'll fix you. I'll get my own back." And so, we get this adversarial kind of relationship going, static sparks between us, and we go around through life like a bull in a china shop, we go around causing sparks to fly all over, and sparks fly all over the landscape.

What does it do to us? It leaves us more deeply entrenched than ever before in that which has shackled us and gripped our spirit. The pall of darkness is heavier; the loneliness, the isolation is more extreme. And the reaction of fear and anger is all the more intense. We do that to each other, and it's one thing when we do that to each other, but we do it also as peoples and as clans and as ethnic groups and as races and as nations, so that the whole world, the whole human story is a violent story of action and reaction, charge and counter charge. Attack and fearful response, and attack again. There must be something deep down in us that causes us to respond with fear – basic insecurity that makes us go through life always interpreting everything as an attack to which we, out of fear, respond in anger. Attack and anger and attack and anger and the static grows and the sparks grow and the conflagration explodes on the earth.

Now, God wants to get through to us. Why don't you do what would be so obvious to do, God, for rebellious subjects like we are? Why don't you come in and clobber us? Why don't you come in with a 2 by 4 to get our attention, beat us over the head? Why don't you come in as the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, with angel hosts and flashing lights and great power? Why don't you climb on a bulldozer and move through history? Get our attention! Show us who we are! Put us in our place!

Well, that's what He decided to do. But He figured, if He did it that way, He'd make us more of what we were already. Oh, He could get our attention. He could make us cower in the corner. He could probably even get our grudging conformity to His will, but it would be full of hostility. It would be full of anger. And it would be the kind of relationship that is characterized by coercion and manipulation.

Well, He had a problem, didn't He? So, He decided to come in the vulnerability of a child. Because what He really wanted was not our subservience. What He really wanted was not our obedience, not our cowering, groveling before the presence of His glory. What He wanted us to do was look Him in the face so that He could say to us, "All I am is love, and I love you." So that we might be able to look Him in the face and say, "I love You, too." And how do you get that kind of thing going? You only get that kind of thing going when you take the risk of vulnerability. So there he lies in a cradle, in a child, in all of the harmless vulnerability of a child - there's the Lord of glory, there's the everlasting God, the Prince of Peace. And you can handle Him and you can run roughshod over Him and you can put Him up

on a cross and do away with Him. But He'll have the last word – it's Love. And every once in a while – out of our intense fear and anger that frequently lashes out from us, at various times or inappropriately – every once in a while, somebody looks up and says, "Why am I fighting and full of anger if God is Love?" Every once in a while, somebody gets disarmed by love.

That really is what Christmas is all about. God is love. He didn't write that in the sky. John says, "In this the love of God is manifested in that He sent His son." Then John says, "Beloved, if God so loved us..." Well, obviously, again, in our human understanding of things, we know the concluding clause will be, "We ought to love God," because we expect that love will be responded to with love. If God loves us, we love God. How neat. We can go through life with this nice, personal relationship with God and create Hell the rest of the time. But that's not what John says. "Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought to love one another." Isn't that amazing?

The Gospel is radical. The word "radical" comes from the root, "radix," which means "root." God addressed the root of our problem at Christmas. The root of our problem is that we're insecure and we're afraid, and so we live always on the attack, interpreting everything as threat, and we create Hell on earth. The Gospel is the radical solution to the human dilemma. The Gospel is God's move into the vulnerability of a child by which He signals to us, "I am love. Be not afraid." Loving, is living without fear, because there is no room for fear in love; perfect love casts out fear. Every once in a while somebody wakes up to that radical story and says, "Wow," and finds the hostility and the anger melt away and life absolutely transformed.

One set free - free from fear, free to love. That is a radical message. That is the Christmas message. That is the truth, and in a moment like this, if one could just be grasped by it, it could change one's life. One could go out for dinner and get ill-served and smile at the person and give them a gentle touch, and leave a large tip and turn their life upside down. They'll tell you that this won't work. This won't work in Washington, of course. Nor in Moscow. Or Beijing. It won't work in Geneva. It won't work at City Hall. It won't work at the boardrooms of industry. Well, as a matter of fact, it really won't work anywhere without the possibility of one being taken advantage of, made a fool of, maybe even crucified. So, it probably won't work. But, to be honest, nothing else works; we only compound the problems: fear, threat, anger, attack, leaving all parties more deeply entrenched in fear.

Nice going, God. We're going to try it on our own. We've got a couple more techniques up our sleeve. But, to be honest, what we need is a miracle of love.

I wonder if it would work. I am, on the first Sunday of 1987, going to make a public pledge to try it, intentionally, in that little circle of my life. I invite you to join me, for loving is living without fear. And I suspect that's really living.

Let us pray.

Father, forgive us for all of the common sense rationalization of our failure to live the Gospel. Release us from our fears. Help us to hear Your word, "Be not afraid." Enable us to respond to Your love by loving. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.