

## **Defeating the Spirit of Fear, Digging the Wells of our Fore Fathers, and Living on a Mote of Dust.**

2 Timothy 1: 1-7

July 22, 2007

I read that the five most common human emotions are, in this order, happiness, fear, sadness, disgust and anger. Of the top five emotions, four of them are negative. The second most common emotion is fear. We may not like to admit it but most of us struggle constantly with our fears. It may not always show on the outside, but deep down within us, we all have basic fears about life. 2020 may go down in history as the year of fear. Covid 19 has changed all of our lives. We wear masks, we avoid crowds of people, we cannot attend sports events, concerts or parties, we work from home, we fear getting the virus. We fear for our economy. Some people fear the people who are taking to the streets marching for equality and basic human rights for all Americans. For the first time in history, some people fear this November election will not be administrated fairly. It is no wonder we are weary and worn out. All of us have certain fears that are deep within us and so it is very easy for us to let fear become our basic attitude toward life.

In today's scripture Paul was talking about fear. Paul was writing to his young friend Timothy. Paul was now in prison and he was depending upon Timothy to take over his work in building the church. Evidently Timothy was full of fear. Timothy was afraid people would not listen as he preached the gospel. He was afraid he might be harmed or even killed. Paul wrote to Timothy and said, "Let God's spirit fill your life again. For God does not give us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a strong mind." Let me say that again. "God does not give us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a strong mind." That is a great verse of Scripture. You can build your life on that. If you don't get anything else out of the service this morning, take that home with you. What does Paul mean by this?

First, Paul tells us that God does not give us a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power. This does not mean when we are filled with the Spirit of God that we will not have difficulties. The problems and troubles we endure are all a part of life. They come to all of us whether we believe in God or not. People who are filled with the Spirit of God face just as many difficulties in life as those who are not close to God. The difference is that when we are filled with the Spirit of God, we have unusual powers to deal with those difficulties. God gives us the inner resources we need to deal with whatever happens to us in life. We may not have control over the chaos in our lives but through God we have the power to control our responses to the chaos. God gives us that power.

Do you remember the familiar story found in John 6 where the disciples went down to the sea and rowed about three or four miles from shore? A strong wind began to blow and the sea became rough. Then they saw Jesus walking on the sea and he came to the boat and the disciples were terrified. Jesus said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." This rescue on the sea shows that through Christ we receive protection and guidance in the midst of great adversity. It is the promise of the presence of God that calms the spirit and the storm. The French author, Victor Hugo, wrote: "Have courage, and when you have laboriously accomplished your daily task, go to sleep in peace. God is awake."

The comedian Gilda Radner had an interesting observation. She said: "When one door closes, another door opens. Except for this one defect, I have a very good car."

God does not give us the spirit of fear. God gives us the spirit of power. He gives us the inner resource of strength to handle the difficult times that life will bring to us.

And second, Paul tell us, "when we are filled with God's Spirit, we are filled with God's love". God's Spirit fills us with a love for life. God fills us with a love for people. I have a wonderful friend named Steve. He is one of the most caring people I know. One day I received a note from Steve that said on a particular day I would

be the subject of his prayers. Throughout that selected day, Steve would focus on me in his prayers. What a humbling experience; someone was praying for me. At the time, I was not going through any particular difficulties. My work was going well. I was very healthy. I had no unusual challenges in life. I did not know that I needed prayer from anyone. But Steve saw it differently. He was not praying for me because I was in need. He was praying for me because he cares.

When I get around people like Steve, I know that I am blessed. We all have people in our lives who are a constant blessing. I have good news this morning. We can all be that kind of person. We can all be the one who builds others up, the one who makes others feel special. Every one of us have people in our lives who need our blessings; our approval, our encouragement. If we withhold these blessings, it not only keeps us from being blessed but keeps others from being all that God intends for them to be. We all have our own sphere of influence over other people. With this authority comes responsibility. We must choose our words carefully and speak blessings and declare good things over the lives of other people. This is the kind of love Paul is talking about. Somebody needs your blessings, your approval; something only you can give.

This spirit of love, God's love, our love for other people, exists whenever we put the needs of others above the needs of ourselves. In 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court entered its ruling in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. This decision held the doctrine of separate but equal facilities based on the color of one's skin was unconstitutional. The case dealt with segregation in schools but extended to segregation in all areas, including segregated restaurants, busses and even drinking fountains. But several years after the decision it was obvious that nothing was happening – segregation continued as it had before the decision. The first civil rights protest was on February 1, 1960 and was a “sit-in” at a lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. It was staged by four students; one of those students was John Lewis, who died several months ago after a distinguished career in Congress. Over the next several years there were hundreds of freedom marches throughout the country seeking social justice. As a direct result of those freedom marches, the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act were passed. These vital pieces of legislation occurred because people took to the streets for a redress of grievances. Marches and protests are a part of who we are. First, we have the right to protest in the First Amendment. Then, beginning in the mid 1800's, women took to the streets to get the right to vote – many times the marches turned violent and many women were arrested. They marched for over 50 years until finally in 1920 the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment was passed giving women the right to vote.

In 1918 miners began strikes and marches seeking fair pay and decent working conditions. Again, sometimes they turned violent but the protests continued until the passage of the National Recovery Act in 1933.

Like the authors of the Declaration of Independence, these freedom marchers, these women, these miners, pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor to bring change, not just for themselves, but for the benefit of others.

Our system of government is built on the necessity of change. The changes are often painful for some and can generate fear; but change is inevitable. The preamble to our U.S. Constitution states, “We the people, in order to establish a more perfect union, establish justice to promote the general welfare of all people”. Notice the challenge in this statement. We did not create a perfect union. We created a framework to establish a more perfect union – a union that was not perfect when established and is not perfect today, but a union that would continually seek to move toward perfection – a union that required constant change. The words from Paul to Timothy give us the blue print for seeking this more perfect union: “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”

We seek to create a more perfect union through voting through protests, through marches, all to benefit the masses through love.

And finally, Paul says to Timothy that when we are filled with the spirit of God, we have a sound mind and a healthy attitude toward God and life. To do this we need to look to the history of our country and pull out those people and those events that define who we are as a nation. We read in the Book of Genesis that Abraham had dug many wells in the desert and named each one of them. After Abraham died, the Philistines covered up the wells. But then Isaac dug them up again and gave the wells the same names his father had given them. Our challenge today is to dig again those wells where our fore-fathers found life and hope and to incorporate the best of their lives into our own. We need to dig deep and examine again the heritage of this country that has made us such a great nation.

When Abraham Lincoln was elected President a number of his friends and neighbors gathered in Springfield, Illinois, to see him off to Washington. As he left Springfield to face the monumental challenges of being president, Lincoln said to his friends: "Trusting in God who can go with me and remain with you and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be good." There it is. God was right at the center of his hopes and dreams for his presidency and for America. That is the spirit we need today.

Back in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century railroads were being built all over the country. They were the vehicle of the future. They could go fast and carry lots of people and cargo. One time a man asked Henry David Thoreau if he thought the railroads were a tremendous improvement over the stage coach. Thoreau responded by saying "Provided the railroad carries better people. Otherwise it is only a means of going faster." What a great truth. Thoreau was saying the real value of things is determined by what they do to people. There are some new things that can help us become better people. There are some new things that hinder us from becoming better people. There are some old things from the past that if we bring them forward will make us better people.

I did my law studies in Washington State and some years after graduation we purchased a small condominium in Bellevue, Washington. It was my goal to spend time there in retirement sailing the many lakes and sounds in and around Seattle. The condo was located about two blocks from the Crossroads Mall and about a mile from the Microsoft campus. Microsoft hired the best and the brightest from every corner of the earth and those people shopped at the Crossroads Mall. I really enjoyed spending time at the mall. It was like visiting the United Nations. It drew people of all races and nationalities, the food and stores reflected the vast diversity of people. It was a picture of what this country can be.

On June 10, 1963, President Kennedy delivered a Commencement Speech to the graduates of American University. In this address he talked about resolving differences to make this country safe for diversity. He concluded his address by saying: "So let us not be blind to our differences – but let us direct our attention to our common interests and the means by which our differences can be resolved. And if we cannot now end our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."

In his novel, *Les Miserables*, Victor Hugo tells of the Emperor Napoleon meeting a humble village pastor whose many acts of charity had brought the cleric notoriety, and makes the point that greatness is enhanced when it encounters goodness. I believe that encounter is found in the origins of the United States. The American Revolution saw ordinary people, for the first time in world history, form an army from scratch to fight not for land or for power, but for the ideal that all people are created equal, and endowed by God with certain rights. This ideal is not just a dream; it is in our DNA. America was indeed, as Lincoln noted at Gettysburg, conceived in liberty to live free from despotic rulers.

The American experiment continuously evolves. We have a lot to be proud of in the achievements of this country and of its people, but we also have done a lot of things wrong and we need to learn from the good and from the bad. Jesus saw a lot of good that came from his forefathers but he also saw a lot of things that needed to

be changed. He had the courage, and the Spirit of God, to step out and challenge the teachings of the chief priests and scribes. He questioned authority. He taught peace and love and acceptance. Compared to the chief priests and scribes, Jesus looked at life through a different ends of the same telescope

Talk about different ends of the same telescope, I heard a story about a man and his wife who were driving through Colorado when they saw a sign for the next town called Saguache. They got into an argument about how to pronounce the name of the town. The first place they stopped when they reached Saguache was a fast food restaurant. The young girl behind the counter asked if they were ready to order. The man said yes but first he wanted her to settle an argument between he and his wife. He said, "I want you to very slowly and carefully pronounce the name of this place." The clerk's eyes grew large and she slowly said, "Burger King?"

This country was founded in large part on the teaching of Jesus but even now, 2000 years after His death and 240 years after the founding of this country we still don't have it figured out. We still have not assured the equal protection of all. We have made progress but we still fall short. We are proud as a country of the dramatic advances we have made in science, technology and medicine and we will continue to lead the world in these discoveries. But I fear those scientific discoveries of the future will not change a thing in our social relationships, just as learning to fly didn't lift us higher as people. On February 14, 1990, the Voyager space probe took a photograph of the planet Earth from a distance of about 4 billion miles. In this photograph the earth appears as a small blue dot. It is an awesome photo showing the microscopic insignificance of Earth in the cosmos. But that photograph of our beautiful earth failed to bring us together the way it should have if we'd truly seen it. "Look again at that dot," Carl Sagan pleaded. "That is here. That is home. That is us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you have ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives ... on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam."

Through science, we have discovered Earth-size exoplanets orbiting distant suns, but so far, no proof of life anywhere in the universe as we know it. This continues to prove to me the rarity, ingenuity, and resplendence of life as we know it exists only on this small mote of dust. But these facts haven't budged our priorities an inch. What is the point of science and exploration if people persist in living and dying as they always have, namely selfishly, obliviously, fearfully and aggressively?

I have good news for you this morning. Today's Scripture tells us a way. Christ attacked the old ways through his counter cultural statements such as "blessed are the peacemakers", "love your enemies", pray for those who persecute you" and "love your neighbor as yourself". Radical teachings at the time. In the Book of John, we read these words of Jesus: "Peace I leave with you, peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled."

There is an old hymn that says: "There is something within me, got ahold of the reins; Something within me, well it takes away my pain. Something within me, I just can't explain. So, I thank God almighty, there's something within." That something within is the Spirit of God. We are called each day to know and be assured that God does not give us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. If we live with this assurance, we will find peace, we will not live in fear, we will keep the Spirit of God as the guiding light in our lives and we will continue to strive toward the development of a more perfect life as individuals, and the development of a more perfect union for us as a country.

AMEN?