

2004-03-14 **Fear**
Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here
to celebrate life in a difficult but beautiful world
and to face our every fear
at the same time as we accept the gifts of life.

And the first gift is this:
the distance from the faintest, farthest star
to the pulse throbbing in our wrist
is no longer than the span of a single breath.

And so in growing humility, may we pray
(together) **May we live fully, love deeply, learn daily and speak truly**
that we might together leave the sacred legacy of a better world...

Sequence

9 AM

My heart this week rose from its warm bed
to confront a world where hundreds die
in train stations at the behest of cool and cruel minds, where the glory of
the scientific method,
so careful and humble of spirit, is slowly being replaced in our
classrooms by the ignorant rant
of those who would raise up their unbending
idols and bid us all adore without critical minds,
and where, as usual, the world is divided between two classes, the
privileged and the unprivileged.

And so my heart aches, and weeps, and yes, clenches like a fist.

But a fist can only punch holes in walls, never soothe or comfort or play a flute or piano or paint or perform delicate surgery or arrange pots of flowers to delight the eye.

So now I must come to this silence where I can open my fist, slowly but surely, to grieve and rage yes, but in a way that helps, not harms; heals, not hates.

Oh, Silence, come now, embrace me as I arise from my bed to greet you and welcome you. Hold me in your arms, rock me tenderly for a time, for I could use your ministry today....

silence

As I unclench my fist, may I open it wide and caress the faces of those whom I love, and cherish, and who bring their love to me, and their challenge. May I whisper their names aloud to make them present, or simply see them in my mind's eye, present with me because they live in my heart. And I pray that my hand stay open afterward, so I might once again grab the plow and go forward, turning up the ground and sowing seeds for a harvest-dream of honesty, courage, faithfulness and relentless peace.

naming

And now, as we begin our work, let our hearts arise like the morning sun rises, not because it moves, but because we, standing on something greater than ourselves, the earth, are moved. Let this music bid our hearts arise, and get to work...

11 AM

A Latin poet, a thousand years ago, wrote this:
Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.
Where there is love, there you'll find God.

Today, a poet might say this:

Where there are two people finding a way
through a conflict without mindless hatred
or bodily harm, there you will find God, or there you will find respect, or
there you will find love or there you will find truth.

And where there are minds who study the
workings of the world honestly, linking fossil and star *without* the safety
pin of an ignorant theology,
there you will find truth, or there you will find respect, or there you will
find love, or there you will even find God.

When family and friends and citizens round the world wail at the loss of
sisters and brothers amid train station rubble, in those tears, in that
wailing, you will find a godly love, or respect for life, or the very life of
truth.

And I say today, that wherever there is an ideology, an uncritical belief,
a word that claims divine origin, or a nation or religion which claims
perfection, there you will find neither love, nor God, nor respect, nor
truth. For in whatsoever neither moves nor is moved, there can be no
life, and thus no divinity. For such things must I grieve.

Therefore, may the privilege of this Silence ground us both in sacred
grief and in this truth: that we are here together in this place, in this
moment, safe, sound, and surrounded for a time, *O Truth be praised!* by
all that makes for love.

silence

Let our lives be moved here, and thus move toward
all that is loving in our lives... either seeing the faces of those we love
through our tenderness or struggle, or by naming them aloud, or in our
hearts, as a way of saying that they, too, are central to our worship,
central to all that is most precious to us.

naming

Ubi caritas et amor, ibi musica est. Where ever there is kindness, grief, outrage and love, that's where you'll find great music.

Readings

***The First Reading** this morning is one of the little stories of Jesus of Galilee, regarded as authentic by modern scholars. It is found in the Gospel of Luke, written by an anonymous author and a later editor who together have been called Luke since about 150 CE. In the gospel, a later editor surrounded this odd story with a clearly pietistic interpretation. Part of the translation of this story comes from John Dominic Crossan.*

Once there was a judge in this city who had no fear of God and no respect for the people whose lives were affected by his judgements. In the same city there was a widow who pleaded her case before him: "Defend me from my opponent." He refused outright, but she came again the next day, and the next, and the next. Finally, the judge had to say to himself, "I have no fear of God or respect for the people, but unless I give in to this woman, she will wear me down to a frazzle." So in the end he gave in, for even if ethics didn't bother him, she did.

***The Second Reading** is an insightful piece from Helen Waddell's novel, *Peter Abelard* (1933)*

Was there no one over thirty-five who had not some secret agony, some white-faced fear? Half one's life one walked carelessly, certain that

some day one would have one's heart's desire; and for the rest of it, one either goes empty, or walks carrying a full cup, afraid of every step.

Sermon

As I was applying to various seminaries, Starr King School in California sent me back a wonderful booklet about their courses. It was beautifully designed, and exciting. At first, I flipped through it quickly. Then I decided to go through the whole thing slowly, page by page.

However, the quotation on the very first page, a line from Albert Camus, simply stunned me. It read: "What gives value to travel is fear..."

"What does *that* mean?" I wondered? "How is going to seminary like travel? Why bring up *fear* on the first page? Is seminary frightful? And is *fear* really *valuable*?"

Well, Starr King accepted my application and I went. The Camus quotation proved prophetic. My three years of seminary simply brimmed with fear.

It's fearful to look inside yourself and see the denials, the doubts, the anger, the sense of failure, but you have to do that in seminary.

It's fearful to stand up in front of people for the very first time and preach.

It's fearful when people at your internship church come to you and pour out their incredible problems to you and you realize you're only 27 and don't have a clue as to how to respond sensibly.

Oh yes, there is a lot of fear in seminary.

And by the way, Camus was right about travel in a more literal sense too. On my first sabbatical, I traveled alone to the Soviet Union. As the

cab pulled away from Vuknovo Airport for the ride into central Moscow, I was suddenly filled with absolute panic and terror. What if “something happens?” What if I lose my contacts and can’t see anything? What if I am arrested for some unknown reason and get sent to Siberia? What if they laugh when I speak my ridiculous Russian? I imagined catastrophe after silly catastrophe. I almost told the cabdriver to go back to the airport so I could go home to my nice, safe bed. But I reasoned with myself slowly and deliberately, faced my fears rationally, and decided to stay. And, except for the food, I had a great time for weeks.

I tell you, preaching on this topic really got my memory to working. I remember having to come down from the high board when I was ten. Too far down. I was terrified.

And I remember screaming at the movie *Alien*. Yes, I know it was “just a movie,” but I assure you, I shook with fear in every bone in my body.

I remember being whacked around on a plane in a terrible storm. That was fear beyond words!

I remember going before the Fellowship Committee, the credentialing body I now sit on. I was 27 years old and shaking in my boots.

And I remembered every date I have ever been on...what is a date but concentrated fear? “Rejection..” now there’s a word that can make you grind your teeth to powder.

And yes, I am still utterly afraid, thank you, of all roller coasters, tilt-a-whirls, or anything else that tries to turn my insides into jellied eggplant. I bet my list has translated into a list equally long in many hearts here. Because I swear to you, everyone I have ever met lives with fear. They may whistle in the dark, and pretend they’re not afraid, but they are. It’s everywhere.

Since working on this sermon, I have paid attention to the word *fear*, made a mental note every time I heard it or read it. And I found I am surrounded by it. It's blaring at me in magazines, songs, films, conversations, and books. I actually started counting on Wednesday, and since just then I have encountered it 56 times. Some fear for someone *else's* situation...their friend is sick, or their co-worker is off his meds and acting odd, or her family members drink too much, or they are depressed.

Some fear for their future...the job looks shaky, or it's hard to find one. Some stew in fear about larger issues...they fear the coming election; they fear the direction the country is taking. They fear for the world, for that matter, as it slips back down the slope into a pit of petulant nationalism. Others heed Camus and fear travelling...by car, by plane, and now, especially in Spain, by train...

The reading from Helen Waddel even *suggests a general pattern of fear* in the length of a human life. Younger adults, she says, are fearful that they won't get what they think they should get. And then, when they cross a certain threshold age, they live in fear either because they didn't get it, or because they got it and might lose it. Waddel's words form a short passage, but one of the most harrowing I have ever read. It may not be true for everyone, but it sure is true for a lot of people I know.

The western scriptures go even further...they talk about the "fear of God." It's a startling phrase, I think. The Greek word for fear in the story about the judge and the widow you heard this morning is a word you have heard before, even if you don't know any Greek. *Phobia*. In English, a phobia is a certain focused and often irrational fear that is often more psychological or even physical in origin... such as claustrophobia or agoraphobia. Such phobias, I hear, can even be treated successfully with medication.

But *fear of God* is something else. So let's look at the story which contains that phrase.

The judge in the story has, according to the text, “no fear of God, nor respect for anyone.” In the language that Jesus spoke, such a text is called “a parallelism.” The phrase “no fear of God” parallels the second phrase “nor respect for persons.” These two ideas are thus associated intimately. Furthermore, the translation “fear” is misleading...the Greek word “phobia” can be just as easily translated as “reverence.” So the phrase might be translated as “the judge had no reverence for God, and thus, no reverence for people.” Reverence, you might say, is a healthy form of fear.

The judge in the story refuses the widow’s plea. Bad news. A widow, in those days, was among the poorest of the poor. She had little legal status. Thus, the poor people who first heard this story would have recognized what it was about right off...the sad story of ill-gotten gain and selfishly maintained power. The judge, a man of privilege, was siding with the foe of the widow, someone keeping her from money that she needs to live. Some would have surmised that the judge was probably even getting a kickback. Everyone hearing this story told for the first time would have already imagined, by this time, a most unhappy ending. The widow, being an unprivileged woman, should have been afraid of the judge and his power. His power, after all, is absolute over her. He is part of a system of privilege and power that had withstood generations of Galilean farming families slipping into destitution because of changing economic times.

But in Jesus’ story, the woman, terrified as she must be, persists, and comes back, and back, and back. And finally the judge is worn down, and concedes.

This story must have been the most hopeful story the people had heard in a long time. Imagine...the story is saying...imagine if unprivileged people actually *faced their fears* of the privileged, and actually demanded what they need to live. It could turn the whole world upside-down.

“If the people actually faced their fears.” What does it mean, to face one’s fears?

1. I think it means: 1. to realize that not all fear is negative. If we are in a car with a friend and the friend has been drinking, and the car is weaving, our fear is not foolish, but sensible. Danger should make us fearful. It’s a warning. We have to insist that we take over the wheel and drive. Sometimes children’s fear of a violent or boundary-less parent enable them to find clever ways to avoid being hurt. They may have to be in therapy as adults to help ease the burden of such an upbringing, but at least they are alive to do so.
2. Second, it’s important to realize that facing our fears is not the same thing as becoming oblivious. Just because you claim to be fearless does not mean that you are not in danger. Whistling in the dark might not show your bravery, but your foolishness.
3. Our fears can be faced in surprising ways. Sometimes, amusement park rides, horror movies and frightening campfire stories are socially accepted ways to help us recognize the distorting power of fear in our lives. Abandonment, rejection, hurt, violence, abuse, separation, even snarling dogs or wild beasts... all of these are the real fears in our lives. But the symbolic, ritualized fears generated by park rides and terror tales enable us to feel that we can survive the actual horrors. Most of us do...even if some of us have to limp the rest of our lives.
4. I don’t know about you, but when faced with a fearful decision, I procrastinate. I try to escape by putting it off. But that means that I have allowed fear to *dominate* my life. Now, there is no such thing as a life without fear. I know that. But fear does not have to dominate and control everything. And in some ways, that’s what most fear is really about fear of loss of control. This is why spiritual practices from many religious traditions, including our own, always are quick to point out that our sense of being in control is a fiction to begin with, and that the sooner we dispense with the idea of our own

omnipotence, the better. “The idea of the omnipotence of God,” said the late Unitarian Universalist theologian Charles Hartshorne, “is a big mistake.” I’d say that the idea of the omnipotence of human beings is an even bigger mistake, and one that needs our constant attention. As Siddhatha Gotama, the Buddha, said over and over, in one way or another, “Loss of things, loss of people and loss of control is part and parcel with being alive. Grieve yes, but don’t let your fear that these things will happen shape your life, because you already know they will happen. Your whole life will then become twisted and distorted by fear. Just breathe in and breathe out, knowing you are not in control of the universe or each other’s lives, and that the gods are not controlling you either, *or* the weather *or* earthquakes *or* sickness, and that peace will only come to those who face their fears, not nurture them.” We may begin to face our fears by going into the forest with Wendell Berry, or sitting in a certain spot like the child in our story this morning, or by meditation or prayer each to his or her own. But I assure you, fears can be faced and put in their proper place.

5. Sometimes we can get so scared that we pretend to be someone we are not. Or we get so scared that we hold on to others so tight that we make ourselves a nuisance. Or, in psychotherapist Sheldon Kopp’s words, sometimes I can get so scared not to be part of “us” that I give up being who “I” am, and take on the characteristics of the group. These are all examples of how fear can distort reality and cause us to lose ourselves.

And they are examples of why fears must be faced, named, analyzed and reduced to their proper proportion by our reasoning minds, our devotional practice, and our rational discourse.

6. And finally, fear is tied to a social understanding of justice. Since 9-11, commentators have been speaking of a “culture of fear” here in the States. Security is lost, since the fall of the towers. I’d like to suggest that our security was a fool’s belief in the first place, an illusion, but I certainly agree that the 9-11 terror sank deep into my bones. But others

have written of a deeper culture of fear that preceded 9-11 where Americans are afraid, according to Barry Glassner, of a whole host of things, road rage, teen moms, crime, gun-toting children, mutating viruses, as well as the old traditional social fear, minorities.

But I would like to suggest that all of these socially conditioned fears, which are often based on media hysteria and utterly falsified statistics, are to distract us from facing and transcending more important fears fear of confronting unjust leadership, fear of calling people to account, fear of speaking up, fear of doing as the widow did in Jesus' parable this morning. What did she do? She went after justice again and again and again, despite what looked like insurmountable odds. When we begin to face our real fears, we too can demand justice again and again, though the whole system is arrayed against us, and the authorities themselves are like that judge, as cynical and as confident as can be, neither fearing God, nor respecting any human person...two different ways of saying basically the same thing. When we reverence the power of justice and compassion as being higher than any other thing on this green earth, even more worthy of our awe and wonder than the stars themselves, we are doing what the scriptures mean by "fearing God." Most of us may not use that antique language anymore, but the idea expressed in that phrase is still a good one, whatever language we use. So, I'm saying that if we face our deepest, most distorting fears, and lift up our more healthy fears, i.e. our reverence for what is truly worthy, we might find ourselves acting like that widow in the story...beaten before she even shows up, but getting up again and again going to the bench of the inflexible authority and saying: "None of this unscientific creationism taught in our schools! No more talk of marriage for one group of people only! No more panic about our court system demanding equal access, *it's their job!* No more arbitrary privilege based on gender or skin color, or national origin. And no more blowing people up... it doesn't convert anyone, or bless anyone's ideals or make anyone want to hear your case...it simply makes people cry and get mad. And no more lying, secrets, slander, innuendo or name-calling, either."

If we said these things over and over and over, many of us, despite the odds against us, what might happen? Might the parable of our lives have a happy ending too?

The journey from the beginning of our lives to their end will never be without fear. Fear, like loss, is probably a permanent part of the picture. Some of that fear needs to be faced, and pushed to the side as distorting and foolish.

Some of that fear, shading toward the reverence side, is actually *valuable*...as Camus said.

To recognize that we are part of the whole and not the whole shebang, that we are not omnipotent any more than any moral God would be, and that we thus owe each other the trembling reverence that supports justice for us all on earth every hour of every day... that fearful journey is valuable indeed.

Offering

A Pericope from a Made Up Gospel

One day, Jesus was walking along the seaside near Caesaria when some townspeople caught up to him to talk with him. One of them said: "Teacher, one of Pontius Pilate's men came to my house and demanded that I give him whatever he wanted, or else. I am afraid." And another of them said: "Teacher, one of Herod's parole officers sent my friend to prison without a trial and without any bail. I fear for him." And a woman said to him: "Teacher, my son is in a faraway land. I heard from a friend of mine at the docks that there was a great fire in the capital of that land, and I am scared." Many more spoke to Jesus of their fears and terrors. And Jesus was silent for a while, and then said: "Many are the woes of the world. They are heavy indeed when borne on the shoulders of one person. But you are many who can join hands, touch shoulders and bear the burden together. Fear

will not disappear, but together you have the power to slowly but surely stand against the policies of Pilate and Herod, and to comfort each other when the news makes you tremble. When two or three are gathered in the name of Love and the Power of Truth, fear can no longer take a place at the table.” Then he embraced them all, one at a time, and continued on down the beach to be alone for a time.