

# Fear of Life/Death

April 25, 2010  
Rev. Mark Belletini

## Opening Words

We are here,  
**on a rain and lilac-scented spring day,**  
to worship, to celebrate our lives  
**while we face our fears, ground our strength,**  
and learn to walk gently  
**on this, our common home, the earth. And so...**

**Mindful that we share a common world, but approach that world in different ways, we begin our celebration together by kindling our promise of mutual honesty, attentiveness, and deep courtesy. May we become more proficient at gratitude and awareness, that we might more deeply embody the kind of justice and peace which embraces everyone on earth.**

## Sequence

Lilacs and silence. Spring rain and silence. Thunderclaps and silence. Pink tulips and silence. Our footfalls on the muddy earth and silence. Unknown birdsongs and silence. Woodpeckers and silence. Chasing squirrels and silence. Grief and silence. Joy and silence. Memory and silence. Love and silence. Spirit and silence. Earth Day and silence. All of us here gathered and silence. Come silence, and soothe hearts that ache, lift hopes that falter, and wrap arms of peace around the shoulders of those who bear heavy burdens. Come, silence...

*silence*

Remembering and silence. Concern and silence. Anticipation and silence. We are here with all of our lives, our loves, our worries, our grief, and each of these feelings is attached to specific people whose heartbeats link to our own. Into the common silence, may we now release their names into this safe place; either within us, or vocalized quietly, remembering that nothing we do, feel or think here today leaves them out.

*naming*

Silence and community. Silence and singing. Amen.

## Readings:

*The first reading comes from the novel Salvation Army, a translation from the French L'armée du Salut by the Abdellah Taïa. It's an autobiographical novel by a gay Muslim from Morocco, and it's one of the most amazing books I have read in these last ten years. This reading is in the form of a conversation.*

Can I interrupt for a second?

***Sure, what's going on?***

Well, maybe it's a dumb thing to say, but I think you look an awful lot like Michel Foucault...the philosopher.

***Do you really think so?***

Yes, you look just like him, even your glasses.

***Should I take that as a compliment?***

I would. Michel Foucault was a great writer, a courageous and admirable man.

***But how do you know if I am a courageous and admirable man?***

I don't know...you seem like someone people could depend on.

***How flattering!***

I get a certain sense of security from you, of protection...

***You seem afraid of something. What are you afraid of...?***

Afraid of? Afraid of life, like everybody else.

***But what is it you are afraid of? To say you're afraid of life is precise and vague at the same time.***

I'm afraid of the sea because I almost drowned once...

***And that's it?***

I'm afraid I've made the wrong choice...maybe I would have been happier if I had stayed back in Morocco, allowed my mother do everything for me...

***The Second Reading*** comes from my friend and colleague, the wonderful Meg Barnhouse, from her wonderful book "Did I Say That Out Loud?" She is a humorist, as many of you will remember from when she last preached here, but these are very serious words indeed.

Here's what I'm thinking. We're scared of the wrong things. We lock our car doors and take our kids home to where the guns are. We tell them all about being wary of pedophile strangers, and we forget to tell them about protecting themselves from their uncles and cousins. We're scared of people, and worry that they want to rob or rape us, but we don't want to hurt their feelings.

Isolation is greatly to be feared, but our fears keep us alone. Ignorance is greatly to be feared, but our fears keep us associating only with folks of our same nationality, class and color. Looking like a fool is greatly to be feared, but our fears keep us silent when we should speak up, and make us talk too much when we should be quiet, and so we end up looking like fools after all. Our fears keep us from growing, changing in a supple way. Our fears lock us down into a narrowness of experience that sucks the marrow from our bones and leaves us in safe homes with satisfactory retirement funds.

Yeah, we're scared of all the wrong things.

## Sermon

As usual, I was disappointed, but not surprised.

Years ago, you see, I heard colleagues asserting that “studies” had been made which offered clear results. And because of these studies, it was now certain that most modern Americans feared public speaking... *something I am doing right now*...**four** times as much as they feared death. That's right, death.

I checked on the sources; and of course, as usual, this is just another urban legend. The famous Book of Lists mentions it as sober fact, but it's completely untrue. No studies have been done; nothing has been proved.

I'll grant you that over my years in the pulpit I have asked people to read for me during the service, only to be told they would rather be struck by lightning than stand in this pulpit and read so much as a single word. So, like many urban legends, the claim has some basis in the personal experience of at least a few people.

But I was struck by what Abdellah Taïa wrote in his novel, when he claims he is *afraid of life*... “*like most people*.” Now, I have had many people tell me over the years that they have been wrestling with their fears of death; but so far, not one person has come to me to express a fear of life. Not one. In the novel, Taïa explains his fear of life by telling us that he almost drowned as a child. “That's it?” asks his friend, skeptically. “That one event is why you are afraid of *all life*?” Taïa goes on to explain that he is afraid he may have made the wrong choices in his life...but even that does seem very compelling to me, coming as it does from the mouth of a 22 year old college student in Geneva, Switzerland, who is having his first experience away from home and his doting mother down in Morocco. Why wouldn't there be fear...healthy fear...when going through such changes?

Nevertheless, the notion of “fearing life” struck me forcefully this week, while I was reading a biography of the great Italian martyr, Giordano Bruno. For those of you who do not know him (and he is far less famous than Galileo, in whose era he lived), Giordano Bruno was a Dominican Friar from Naples/Napoli who seems to have been the first human being to have taught that the sun was one star among many stars, and that each of the stars could be suns of their own, with planets and people whirling around them. He taught that the Universe was infinite in time

(duration) and space (size). He traveled around Europe, teaching in various cities...Frankfurt, Marburg, Oxford, Venice, and writing many books about his cosmological theories. He also expressed opinions that would eventually be labeled *Unitarian* or *Universalist* by later theologians, once that term had been invented, which was in the year 1600. (The year, interestingly enough, when Bruno died.) For example, Bruno denied the idea of the Trinity, had no use for ideas like the divinity of Jesus or the virginity of his mother, taught universal salvation, and openly defended the radical teachings of our spiritual ancestor, Arius of Alexandria. Like Spinoza after him, he was regarded as an “atheist” because he thought the universe and God were basically the same. As you might imagine, these ideas were not the best to be tossing about publicly in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe. So for his expressed religious opinions, and, I think, his theory that the universe was infinite and populated by other beings, he was brought to Rome, given a chance to recant...which he refused; and then he was burnt at the stake in the Piazza del Fiore, or Flower Square, the central market of Renaissance Era Rome. Sadly, the report goes, some on-lookers that day cheered as he died.

But back to this “fear of life” thing. I found it strangely reflected in what Bruno said to the judges who accused him of heresy. As soon as they pronounced sentence, he shook his fist at them, and then said to them, in Latin: “I think there’s a good chance you are pronouncing this sentence against me with greater fear in your hearts than I have in mine upon hearing it.” In other words, he was telling them that he was not as afraid of dying as they were of living in a world where they had to use threats of death to maintain their control. Considering how terrible death by fire is, Bruno’s statement seems all the more profound, and wise.

My colleague Meg Barnhouse, however, doesn’t so much compare and contrast fear of life with fear of death. Instead, she insists it’s actually possible to be afraid of the *wrong* things.

She clarifies: *Here’s what I’m thinking. We’re scared of the wrong things. We lock our car doors and take our kids home to where the guns are. We tell them all about being wary of pedophile strangers, and we forget to tell them about protecting themselves from their uncles and cousins. We’re scared of people, and worry that they want to rob or rape us, but we don’t want to hurt their feelings.*

Boy, did *that* ring a few bells. Like how we were told to lock our car doors when we were kids because we were going through “bad”...read “black” neighbor-hoods. Like the funeral I did for a 12-year-old who shot himself with his mother’s gun. Like the stories I hear about sexual assault within homes, among family members...far more than I hear about sexual assault on the streets, although I am certainly aware that does happen. But as a minister, I hear far less about “strangers with candy” than I hear about those “uncles and cousins” Meg mentions, not to mention parents, step-parents, neighbors, and respected teachers and clergy.

“We don’t want to hurt their feelings...” Boy has that sentence echoed through my life, over and over, a mantra of “don’t tell the truth, don’t tell the truth, don’t tell the truth. Be afraid of what your neighbors, your friends, your family members, your leaders will think of you, so never, NEVER tell the truth.”

I'd like to suggest, interpreting a sentence in our new Mission statement, that such mantras are associated entirely with privilege. The privilege of isolation. The privilege of being above it all, and uninvolved. "We don't want to hurt their feelings..." nor, for that matter, "upset the apple cart," or "bother the neighbors," or simply, "get involved."

As we approach the big BREAD Meeting on May 3, I am thinking about one of those meetings about seven or eight years ago. It was a meeting where something happened which upset many people, including, at the time, I have to admit, myself.

A noted local leader was asked to give a three-minute talk. She agreed to the three minutes, and was glad to be asked. The staff stressed the importance of time in our meetings. No one else was going to get any more time than she was, or any less. It was a question of fairness. She was told there would be reminders and signs to help her remember, since clearly, speaking to thousands might be a tad exciting, and three minutes might go by fast.

Now, this meeting was during an election year, and she was up for election. (And for the record, I've always voted for her when she has run for anything; I think she is a good person for this kind of work.) And so, when her time came to speak at the Action Meeting, she talked for her three minutes, speaking very well to the points she said she would touch on. The thousands gathered were with her. But she went on when her time was over to basically campaign, and talk about other things. Signs went up. She ignored them. People put their hands on her shoulder gently and spoke to her directly. She ignored them. Three minutes became six, and six became nine, and there was no end in sight. So without planning this in advance, a large number of folks started to clap loudly to bring her talk to an end. She ignored that too. So, many of them simply stood up and turned their backs toward her.

Largely, the people who applauded and stood up were from historic African American churches. Many of whose members can easily recognize stubborn rudeness when they see it, because they've experienced examples of it all their lives. Many of whom are understandably fed up with the "We don't want to hurt their feelings..." mantra. A few centuries of slavery and Jim Crow in your family and church history could make you less concerned about "upsetting apple carts" and more concerned with truthfulness, accountability and witnessed promises kept by elected leaders.

But, when the meeting was over, I did *not* hear that this local leader running for office had been rude, but that *BREAD* was a rude organization, since some members of the organization, mostly, but not all, African American, stood and turned their backs, and told her to stop and keep her word.

Was it an uncomfortable night for many? You betcha. For people of every color and background. Stomach acid galore that night! Shaking guts. My guts were shaking too. My hands were clammy, my head ached. I felt sorry for the local leader.

But, as I spent time later analyzing what happened, I became aware that my "sorry" was totally misplaced. I knew very well that at BREAD meetings, every official who is invited is always told in advance, with both clarity and repetition, exactly what is going to happen, what is going to be

said, and how much time they have. There are never any surprises. Never any ambushes, or planned-behind-closed-doors nasty confrontations or intimidations. Never any serious conflicts, unless a person does not keep their word, or doesn't call us ahead and tell us why. (I'm sick; my mother is sick; whatever.) But when someone just blows us off after making a promise to be there, they *are* called on it. It is named. Aloud. That's called accountability. The noun form of the adjective *accountable*. That's a word in our Vision statement. We ask ourselves to advocate for...an *accountable* conscience.

But it's frightening to advocate for such things. It's fearful to speak up. It's terrifying to face those who have power, who have reputations, who have power behind the scenes.

It's that attitude which Abdellah Taïa would call "fear of life." And Giordano Bruno says that fearing life is a lot more foolish than fearing death. And Meg Barnhouse, I think, does a good job helping Friar Bruno explain what he means by saying that.

*"Looking like a fool," she writes, "is greatly to be feared, but our fears keep us silent when we should speak up, and make us talk too much when we should be quiet, and so we end up looking like fools after all."*

In other words, it's a fool's errand to try and live your life *so as not to come off like a fool*. It's gonna happen no matter what you do...speak or keep silent. So better not to worry about such things, and simply tell the truth, name what you see, keep promises, and face your fears. For, she continues, *"Our fears keep us from growing, from changing in a supple way. Our fears lock us down into a narrowness of experience that sucks the marrow from our bones and leaves us in safe homes with satisfactory retirement funds. Yeah, we're scared of all the wrong things."*

So here is what I think. I think that Meg Barnhouse is right. Being astounded by the sheer fact and profound mystery of our mortality...I can understand that. I can understand the awe and shaking wonder of standing under the stars at night and contemplating the mystery of one's own death. I do that all the time. But being afraid of life...that is, being afraid of telling the truth, speaking up, looking like a fool, is as unhelpful, ultimately, as our penguin, in the story this morning, being afraid to swim in the deep, dark ocean that was his destiny. Wanting to fly above it all and look down from above...that's a privileged view. But to jump in and swim in what's before us, that is the nature of our life, that is what it means to *live*. To be alive is not to avoid fear, but to face it, not to run from the truth, but to participate in it. Not to avoid issues, but to name them...and that can be done with kindness, you know, and direct simplicity. Not every confrontation needs to be dramatic. The drama only comes when one party does not want to communicate in any way, and wants to fly above everyone else and look down from a privileged place.

Is public speaking, like I am doing right now, scary? Sure. I try and make it look easy, so my sermons are about the topic, not about my fear, but, believe me, it's an effort. But *am* I doing it? Yes, I am. And boy, am I ever glad, thankful, blest and excited about facing both life and death, both joy and sorrow, both facts and wisdom while standing here, before all of you, in this pulpit.

## **Offering**

We can choose either to bless life or to run from it. We can choose to face our fears, or let them hold us back....so it is that we give to bless and face the future, whose shape we do not know. Some give in other more electronic ways, others prefer this ancient way. In all cases, what we give, we give freely as a tangible sign that our ancient free tradition resists coercion in all matters of the spirit.

The morning offering is now given and received.

**Litany for Earth Day** *Alice Walker, 1991*

**We have a beautiful mother**

Her hills are buffaloes  
Her buffaloes hills.

**We have a beautiful mother**

Her oceans are wombs  
Her wombs oceans.

**We have a beautiful mother**

Her teeth the white stones  
at the edge of the water  
the summer grasses her plentiful hair.

**We have a beautiful mother**

Her green lap immense  
Her brown embrace eternal  
Her blue body everything we know.