

“Fear vs. Faith”
Psalm 42; Joshua 24:14-18; Matthew 8:23-27
Salem United Methodist Church
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Last Sunday we received word of the mass shooting in Orlando. The news was devastating, horrific, and the worst nightmare. Forty-nine innocent people lost their lives while simply enjoying their Saturday night. There is so much fear in our world. We are even fearing our fears. Fear is a choice. We can live in fear or we can live by faith.

Today is Father’s Day. Some people have fond memories of their fathers. Some fathers are or have been loving Christian men. These fathers are honest, honorable men who are affectionate, caring, and fun fathers. These fathers listen to their children, seek understanding, and give wise counsel, as well as love to horse around with their kids. Their children know that they can depend on their dads for anything. Children who have this kind of father are blessed because this kind of parent reflects the image of our heavenly father. However, not all children are as blessed. Some children live in fear of their fathers. Some fathers are or have been alcoholics and harm their children physically and/or emotionally during their drunken rages. Other fathers just don’t understand children who yearn for attention. Instead they may receive their father’s anger instead of the love these children crave and need. Fatherhood is all about putting the children first and making sacrifices for them.

Sonora Smart Dodd had this kind of father. His name was William Jackson Smart. He was a Civil War veteran. After his wife died, Mr. Smart became a single parent to six children. Sonora recognized that her father made countless sacrifices for his children. She saw him as the most loving, selfless man. Her Dad was her hero. In 1909 in Spokane, Washington, Sonora was listening to a Mother’s Day sermon at Central Methodist Episcopal Church when she thought of the idea of having a Father’s Day. Sonora suggested to her pastor that the church honor fathers in a similar manner that mothers were being honored. So on June 19, 1910, the first Father’s Day sermon was given to honor the faith of our fathers.

On this Father’s Day, there are at least forty-nine fathers are grieving the loss of their children. They received notification this week that their son or daughter was one of the victims of last Sunday’s shooting. Their adult children wore the label of LGBT: Lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, but each one of them was loved. Each was someone’s son, daughter, brother, sister, neighbor, or co-worker. Each one mattered to God. For those who lost someone last Sunday, they have been crying all day and night, living this nightmare. Seeking answers to the faith question as the psalmist did, “Where is your God?” When we face life’s fears, our faith can be challenged. Some will succumb to fear and hide behind locked doors with weapons at the ready. I can just hear Jesus asking these people, “Why are you afraid? Where is your faith?”

When Jesus’ life was threatened, he didn’t say to his disciples, “Let’s find all the weapons we can to fight off the Pharisees and the Romans who are coming to kill me.” Instead he gave an extended talk about love and peace. Why are we afraid? Where is our faith?

Why are we afraid? When the storm came up on the sea, Jesus’ disciples, many who were experienced waterman, became afraid. They must have weathered many storms and knew how to ride them out, yet they were afraid. Even with Jesus with them, they were still afraid. Fear is contagious. The fear that one has can elicit fear in others. If I yell, “Mouse!” many might get up and stand on the pew. We learn to be fearful from the people around us such as our parents, friends, siblings, neighbors, and colleagues. So if someone we know is afraid of the dark, we might become afraid of the dark. Also, studies in neuroscience have found that when we are afraid, our ability to reason diminishes. As the level of fear increases, our powers of judgment, decision-making, and evaluation go down. Fear then creates a distorted reality, an out of proportion reality to the actual threat. Fear creates insecurities and often an irrational response so that even experienced waterman can become afraid in storms. Why are we afraid of today?

Scott Bader-Saye in his book, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*, states that our fears make us vulnerable to being manipulated through politics, marketing, news programming, and popular culture often in ways that profit others. He states that, “We have become preoccupied with unlikely dangers that take on the status of imminent threats, producing a culture [of] fear...” According to this author, we live in a more fearful culture today because we are allowing others to exploit and manipulate our fears. He asks these questions. What

does all this fear do to our lives? Does suspicion, preemption, and control form or deform our character and our judgment? In other words, what does fear do to our faith in God?

The Bible offers us these refrains: “Fear not,” “Do not be afraid,” or “Do not fear.” These are reminders that with God we have nothing to fear. Joshua who was Moses’ successor offers us three steps to live in faith, and not fear. First, they are to remember how God cared for them. The Hebrew people had experienced fear when they escaped from slavery in the middle of the night, walked through the parted Red Sea, lived in the wilderness for forty years, crossed the Jordan River, and settled into the Promised Land. Through it all God was with them protecting them, providing for them, and saving them. Joshua reminds the people to remember how God has brought them through their worst nightmares. A good lesson for us today. As we remember our history, how has God brought us safe thus far? How has God blessed us? Provided for us? Protected us? Saved us?

Next, Joshua offers the Hebrew people this instruction as they strive to be people of faith. He tells them to, “Fear the Lord.” This term pops up often in the Bible, but it does not mean that we are to be afraid of God. To fear the Lord means that we are revere, respect, admire, honor, stand in awe of how great God is. God is greater than all fear, all hatred, all violence. To live as a people of faith, we are to turn to God, put our trust in God and nothing else. Then Joshua challenges them to serve the Lord as people of faith, but he allows them to choose. He states, “But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.” They can serve the Lord who has brought them to this point or they can serve something else. To whom or to what do we choose to pledge our allegiance? Who do we serve? By living in fear, are we honoring and serving our fears and those who manipulate our fears? What does a life of serving God look like? What is a life of faith?

To follow Jesus in a culture of fear is to practice hospitality, peacefulness, and generosity. These will break down the walls of fear. First, practicing hospitality is reaching out to another with warmth, kindness, and openness. By doing so we are communicating to the other that we respect them as they are, even if we disagree with their religious beliefs, political perspectives, or sexual orientation. Second, when we offer signs of peace, we are saying that even though we have a different viewpoint, we are seeking to understand. A simple handshake is a sign of offering peace. The handshake is an ancient custom of offering peace. By offering one’s hand to another, both parties are signifying that they bring no weapons. Thus a handshake is a way to offer peace and friendship. When we reach out to another, we are communicating that each of us matters to God. A third way to break down the walls of fear is by being generous of our resources: time, talent, and treasure. When we give of ourselves sacrificially to another, we are not only saying that we care about them, but that God cares about them. Practicing hospitality, peacefulness, and generosity put others before ourselves even at great sacrifice. These practices come from the center of faith.

But how do we keep that center of faith when forces of fear and manipulation are all around us? We need to surround ourselves with the voices of faith: daily prayer, daily reading of scripture, and having spiritual friends. Taking time each day to focus on God will keep us focused on who we really are, people of faith and not fear. Finding spiritual companions for the journey is extremely important in a world where we feel like a Lone Ranger. We need each other to share our joys, our challenges, and our concerns. We need to be praying for each other and encouraging one another. These three: prayer, reading scripture, and having spiritual companions will help us lead from the center of faith at work, in our homes, and in our communities and not lead with fear.

These are wise words for all of us on this Father’s Day, but especially for fathers. Children look to their fathers on how to live. So Dads, ground yourself in faith and not fear through daily prayer and scripture reading. Create spiritual friendships. Remember how God has brought you and your family to this point. Serve the Lord through acts of hospitality, peace, and generosity at work, at home, and in your community. And you will watch your children grow into people who lead from the center of faith and not fear.

Reflection Questions: Do you live in fear or do you live by faith? If you are living in fear, are you willing to surround yourself with voices of faith and practice hospitality, peacefulness, and generosity to develop a trust and faith in God?

References: *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear* by Scott Bader-Saye; “Fearing Our Fears,” by Bishop William Willimon, www.minsitrymatters.com; “The Godlyfather” sermon by Bruce Howell

