

The Pilgrim Church of Duxbury
Fear and Trembling
Matthew 26:36-46
Rev. Peggy O'Connor
March 19, 2017

Today is the third Sunday in Lent and this morning we continue our Sermon series on Prayer. Previously in this series we have looked at our desire for answers to our prayers, especially the answers we want, and on Jesus' advice on how to pray. Today we will look at a harder topic: fear.

I said last week, I am frequently asked by people how to pray. When I am asked this I usually say that the how to's are less important than the doing. Then I ask if the person to tell me about their prayer life or their attempts at having one. Most often they say they don't pray because they can't figure out how to...or they are not sure who or what they are praying to...or they don't know what to say...or not to say. It seems there are a lot of impediments to prayer. Then I ask if there has been any time when they just spontaneously prayed. Most often the answer involves fear. They tell me about violent turbulence on a flight that brought them to prayer.

Fear is a great motivator when it comes to prayer. As the old saying goes: There are no atheists in foxholes. Of course there are but the point is well taken, when fearing life is about to end many a unreligious person is moved to prayer and not just in war zones. It happens in Doctor's offices all over the world.

Sadly fear has been used by the church for thousands of years to coerce people into faith. I remember learning about Jonathan Edwards sermon, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, in my American History class in HS. In it he describes the fate of sinners...God dangles them, like a spider at the end of a thread of web, over the fires of hell. Needless to say he got a lot of converts.

Now we of course are more enlightened. We do not come to church out of fear. Ours is a God of love. In fact, we don't even believe in Hell. Right? I wonder. While fear inducing sermons are rare in main line Protestant churches they are still preached in others. As for Hell...well I think this too lingers. The proof of this the fact that it is still the subject of Jokes.

A couple decided to have a second honeymoon at the same place they had their first one...in the Bahamas. Because of hectic schedules it was hard for them to coordinate their flights. So, the husband left on Thursday while the wife was scheduled to fly down the following day.

Having promised to leave their laptops at home so they would not be distracted by work, and knowing that his wife was in back to back meetings and unavailable by phone, the husband was delighted to find a computer in the room when he checked in. He immediately wrote her a quick email about

his arrival and then headed to the beach. What he did not realize is that he had made one little error in her email address.

Meanwhile, somewhere in Texas, a widow returned home from her husband's funeral. She told her children she need a few minutes alone and went into her office. The sound of incoming mail drew her to the computer. Assuming it was a family member or friend sending their condolences she opened the email and read it. Then she fainted. Her children rushed in as she regained consciousness and asked what happened. She weakly pointed at the computer and they read the following:

My loving wife, I've arrived. The trip was much easier than I expected. I checked it with no problems...they had me down for today. You are no doubt surprised to be getting an email from me but they have computers here now! When I checked in they told me that they are expecting you to arrive tomorrow. Looking forward to seeing you then! Hope your journey is as uneventful as mine was.

PS. It sure is hot down here.

Fear of God and punishment that we have inherited, whether it be from our parents or grandparents or just from our society, undermines faith. It can keep us from faith altogether or from going deeper into our faith and it can keep us from prayer. As a chaplain I once visited two people both of whom had had really complicated and extensive surgeries earlier in the day. The first was in a good deal of pain and fearful that they had made a huge mistake in having the surgery. After listening for a while I asked if they would like a prayer. They said yes readily and so I prayed. The other person was also in a lot of pain and like the first person said yes immediately to my question about a prayer but then added: "please pray for Jeannie who had a fall, and Ed whose son is ill, and Sharon who just got a cancer diagnoses". A bit taken aback by this as I had offered to pray for her, I none-the-less prayed for Jeannie, Ed and Sharon. Then I asked, would you like a prayer for you? The patient opened her eyes wide and said in an emphatic voice: "NO!" I said OK and as the patient told me they were tired I left.

Two days later I went back to visit the same two patients. The first one, who had been so thankful for my prayer was looking much better when I walked in the room. They vaguely remember my previous visit and the prayer and apologized for being a bother. When I asked whether they would like another prayer I was surprised when they said, rather emphatically, "NO!" They added, "I'm fine now...no need. I'm not really very religious. I am not sure why I agreed to a prayer the other day. I must have been out of it." Then they looked up at me and said, "Sorry."

Moving on to the other patient I found them also looking better. This one remembered me and thanked me for my prayer, explaining that they prayed for a list of people every day and had worried that they might not get it done that day because of the pain. I said I was glad to of been of help. We talked a bit and when it was time for me I asked if they would like a prayer. The

answer was no because they had already prayed for the people on their prayer list. I said that was great but I was really offering to pray for them...for their healing and return home. The person looked at me and politely said no thank you. Puzzled by this I said, "Your answer surprises me. You are clearly a person of deep faith. You pray for others every day. Why don't you want me to pray for you? The answer was stunning. First of all, God does not want us to pray for ourselves...only for others. Second, what if the healing prayed for did not happen? What would that mean? Would it mean that God did not want healing for them? Would it mean that they were being punished? Would it prove there was no God? No...they said...my faith could not stand this...you cannot pray for me.

Reflecting on these visits I realized that the first patient who had been so eager for prayer at first but then horrified by the idea later, had been motivated to prayer by the fear that they felt. The other patient, who prayed for others but refused prayer for herself had also been acting out of fear. Fear can lead us to prayer and fear can keep us from it.

Fear can bring us to prayer when the plane hits turbulence so severe that shakes us like rag dolls; when our child is in an accident that takes them to the hospital; when our spouse gets a bad diagnosis; when a parent nears death. People who have never prayed on their knees fall to them and pray feverishly...take this from me. Fear levels the playing field like nothing else. But when the only motivation for prayer is fear, then, when the fear disappears so do the prayers.

Similarly, our fears about whether God hears our prayers or if we are praying correctly can and does stop many from praying. So what can we do? Fear is a part of life. We cannot avoid it.

I entitled my sermon Fear and Trembling because that is the title of Soren Kierkegaard's seminal work. It focuses on Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. Using this unthinkable act, Kierkegaard advances a deeply personal faith that leads to a relationship with God that transcends the ethical constructs of the world. Kierkegaard lauds Abraham, not just for his willingness to kill his son, but the fact that he obeys God without any question, complaining, or negotiating. This is true faith in Kierkegaard's view. But compare that to our passage this morning. This is good old fashioned obedience based on fear, in my view. And the antidote to this is Jesus...spelled out for us in our passage this morning.

Jesus takes the 12 to the Garden at Gethsemane...which is just across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem. He and the disciples went there often to pray. But this is his most important and notable trip. Once in the garden he takes three of the disciples to a secluded spot and tells them to watch and pray. Jesus goes a bit further and prays. The three keep falling asleep and Jesus keeps waking them. Then Jesus prays for a last time...he begs God to save him from the fate that awaits him. This is the prayer of fear. But then what happens? Jesus says...but your will not mine be done.

I don't want this to happen...I don't want to go...Save me! Who hasn't had moments when we said things like this to ourselves and to God. But, the faith that allows us to say these things...to beg for help...to acknowledge our weakness and to show our vulnerability is the faith that also teaches us that God is always there...with us...listening...we are never alone...we never go alone...we never stand alone. And this faith allows Jesus to say...I am afraid...but you will be done.

Last week a bronze sculpture of a little girl was installed on Wall Street in the middle of the night. Placed strategically by the artist, the girl stands some fifty feet from the bull of Wall Street fame...facing it. Called Fearless Girl, the sculpture is meant to celebrate bravery...especially the bravery of women. But when I saw this work what I saw thought of was Jesus in the garden...scared to death and yet willing to face what is coming...refusing to run from the Caesar of our day, or at least that is what some would say, this child, like Jesus says...whatever you will God...I will stand here...knowing you are by my side...your will be done. This is the strength of the living God.