

Perfect Love Casts Out Fear (Part 3 of 6 in series on fear)

1 John 4:7-21, Matthew 9:1-8

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I may have told you this story before – I’ve told it many times, because it continues to baffle me, though it was my own experience: In the southern community where I grew up, certain churches put on yearly “Halloween” festivities in the form of outdoor haunted houses. They were generally set in the woods somewhere, and dozens of youth from youth groups all over the area would come to attend these giant, near-professional productions that took place after dark nightly in the weeks before Halloween. Chick-Fil-A catered the events, so afterward we could all have a delicious chicken sandwich. The host churches prepared for months.

During the events, small groups of teens would be ushered through the woods, which were set up as the battle of Armageddon. It was supposed to be the end of time, at least as this church group imagined it, and we were those suffering. There were chainsaws and screams, all kinds of horrors in the dark and we were really *really* frightened. It was pretty much the best kind of haunted house *ever*. It’s WAY scarier being out in the woods and afraid in the dark than in some commercial building in the middle of town.

But at the end of each of these dramatic, horrific journeys, as you would expect from the evangelical churches that hosted them, the pastor would get up and preach a little sermon about how Armageddon would be a lot worse than what we just experienced, and if we didn’t want to go through it, we had better accept Jesus into our hearts, because only Jesus could save us from the horrors. And then the pastor, generally a mid-40’s clean-cut white guy, very trustworthy-looking in his dockers and collared shirt, would invite us to bow our heads – and with every head bowed and every eye closed, we should just lift our hand if we wanted to pray the prayer with him to accept Jesus into our hearts.

Now I had been going to church all my life. I had been baptized. I had been confirmed. I had memorized – and believed – the Apostles Creed. I had given the sermon on Youth Sunday. I had felt God working and moving in my life and knew I had a relationship with Jesus. I was a Christian. But each time I went to one of those things, my trembling little hand went up with the hands of all of my church-going, Christian friends. Because we might have already accepted Jesus, but we sure were going to hedge our bets to stay out of the haunted forest that could plague us forever.

Now, I don’t tell you this story to criticize the ministries of evangelical churches in the south in the 1990’s. I’m not sure those were the *most* effective disciple-making programs in the country, but I think their intentions were pure. However, they may have neglected this beautiful chapter from the first letter of John.

I once asked a favorite seminary professor where I should recommend a new Christian start reading the Bible. I thought he’d advocate starting at the beginning with the great stories of the Old Testament – or the gospels, the stories about Jesus. But he surprised me by saying, “Definitely 1 John. Find out who God is, and how much God loves you, and you can make a lot better sense of the rest.” And I think that’s true. If you haven’t read much of the Bible, or if you’re not sure about the Christian faith, or about being in relationship with the God of the universe, 1 John is a good place to start: it’s short, for one, and doesn’t use a lot of long words or confusing names. And it’s

one of the most beautiful, life-transforming, clear and concise theological statements ever written: God is love. Love is of God. We love because God first loved us. Perfect love casts out fear.

You see, faith cannot be built on fear. Praying to invite Jesus into my life with trembling hands and a racing heart in a cold wood in north Georgia because I was terrified of what might happen if I didn't – would never lead me to understand who God really is, how God acts in the world, or what God wants me to do. We cannot faithfully engage in the life of discipleship because we're afraid of hell. Or death. Or punishment for sins large or small. God doesn't work like that. 1 John tells us that God is not above all power or order, goodness or control, protection or accountability – and God is not first judgment or punishment. God is love.

We've all seen on television or even been a part of those scenes: two people are sitting in a room, one in agony and the other with great compassion on her face: one has a secret too horrible to share and describes it by saying something like, "It's just too awful. It's unforgivable. It's too bad to even say." Now the capacity of humans to do horrible things never ceases to amaze me, nor does our ability to make honest or ignorant mistakes with disastrous consequences. But I'm not sure where we get those ideas that our actions could possibly be beyond the scope of Christ's redemption. I'm not sure why we think we're that powerful, or when someone told us that our flaws have made us unlovable, or not worth God's time. But those ideas are wrong: because the scope of Christ's redemption is all-encompassing, through all time, and throughout the universe. And because God is not first judgment or punishment: God is love.

And what's more is that God loved us first. Before we could do anything to be lovable, or to deserve love, or to earn grace. God loved us first. Before we had done anything right or anything wrong, God loved us. Now I know I'm a sucker for sappy stuff, especially since I became a Mom, but sometimes when I go home for lunch during the day I watch "A Baby Story" on TLC. If you haven't seen it, it's a silly, very predictable documentary-style show that videos a pregnant woman and her family as her due date comes near, then follows her to the hospital, then shows her in her first moment with her new baby. And every time they pull out that squirmy, slimy little person and put it on the mama's chest for the first time, I cry. Every time. I cry because it's so beautiful – the miracle of life is beautiful – but so is the love that the parents have for that child. The child has been nothing but pain to this point – nothing but discomfort and mystery and anxiety and worry and weight gain and financial expense, and yet the first look is love.

And that doesn't even approach the love God has for us – because 1 John tells us not only that God loved us first, but also that God's love is *perfect* love. We are not perfect in love, but God is. Our love can be sentimentalism, self-serving, or simple romantic feeling. It can boil down to a deed on a to-do list: "love others," check. Our love can come in spurts. It can be wishy-washy. It expects things. It keeps score. But God's is self-sacrificing love. God has decided to love us despite the fact that we can never fully reciprocate. It's just in God's nature. And it's in God's love that we become lovable, that we become capable of love, that we love each other and love God back. God's love is first. And God's love is perfect.

So here's the thing: we don't have to fear disappointing God. We don't have to fear God's punishment, or God's judgment. God knows that we're not perfect – in fact, God made us with free will, I believe with the full expectation that we would never be perfect. After all, we're "in God's image," but we're not God. And God knows that our imperfections, our mistakes, our sins, can paralyze us – metaphorically and perhaps physically. So when Jesus meets a paralyzed man he says *first*, "Your sins are forgiven," and *then*, "Get up and walk." Jesus is addressing, in part, the

societal belief of that time that illness was caused by sin – if you were paralyzed, you must have done something really bad to deserve it. So Jesus forgave sin first, to show that that wasn't the case. And he also showed that while the repair of our illnesses is possible, true *healing* is separately: true healing comes when our souls are filled by the grace of God. Medicine may have the power to *fix* us, but God's perfect love can heal us. It can pull the rug out from under our fear. It can free us for joyful obedience and new life.

One of the cool things about being a United Methodist is our emphasis on grace. John Wesley was a big fan of grace – and with good reason – its pretty much the coolest concept I know of. But Wesley had it boiled down to three types of grace: there's the sanctifying grace that most of us (hopefully) experience regularly, that grace that makes us more and more like Christ as we journey together as disciples, a journey we'll be on throughout our lives; back up a little and there's justifying grace, that grace that assures us we are chosen and beloved, part of Christ's own family – the grace that saves us; and before all of that is prevenient grace. It's grace that works on us before we're even aware of God. It's grace that's in our lives before we can begin to acknowledge or understand it. It's grace that is leading us toward our Creator before we even realize we're moving in that direction. Everybody's under the spell of grace. Because God loved us first.

I don't know what kind of illness you might be living with – in body or in spirit – but I tell you there is healing available here. God's perfect love is available. It's reaching out to you, not in judgment, but in grace. And so while God wants us always to be growing toward Christ's example, we need not fear disappointing God. Perfect love casts out fear. We only have to receive that love again and again and again.

Amen.