

May 3

Scripture: I John 4:7-21

Sermon: Perfect Love Casts out Fear

I am going to begin with a word. "Fear." What causes you to stay awake at night? What causes you to tremble in your shoes? The things that cause us fear are twofold. There are the situational moments where something is happening that causes your heart to race. This can be anything from being in an accident to encountering a spider, if you happen to have that particular phobia as some in my household do. These fears are momentary and subside as soon as the situation resolves itself. But there are other fears. These are the ones that keep us awake at night. Let me give you just a couple of examples. We visit a doctor and are awaiting test results. The results of those tests might be life changing for us in the extreme. We hear that we or a loved one has an incurable illness and we fear the future. We realize that a relationship or a job is coming to an end and we fear the "what ifs." Then we hear John saying, "Perfect Love Casts out Fear." We wonder what does that really mean? Obviously we don't have it, whatever the "it" is, because we have fear. So how do we get it?

We need to first understand the context for those who were receiving this letter. John feels that we are in the end times and the Day of Judgment is about to come. This was a prevalent thought in the early church. There was no thought that Jesus' return would not happen soon. If you are in an "end times" mindset this could cause you a lot of anxiety. John says, "Don't worry." John wants them to know that they have nothing to fear if they continue to follow the commands to love and let God's love abide in you. For John, as long as you stay connected to the community of faith you can face that Day of Judgment with confidence because God's love has been perfecting you. You do not need to fear punishment but instead know you are forgiven and loved. So, when he talks about "perfect love casts out fear" John is not saying that if we have enough faith we will never again have to deal with fear. Or the reverse, that if we find we are fearful about something it is an indication that we are lacking in our faith. John wants to comfort his listeners who worried about whether or not they were good enough to get into

heaven. He is saying to them and to us, have no fear. God loves you, forgives you and is not out to punish you.

But that doesn't mean that we are absolved from doing anything. He goes on to say that this perfecting "Love of God" challenges us to love others. He makes it pretty clear. If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother and we would add sister, he is a liar. If you cannot love them, whom you can see, then how can you love God who you do not see?" Most of us would say it is a lot easier to love God that we don't see than the person we meet every day. God doesn't complain about our behaviors. God doesn't get under our skin by the way God acts. You know the list of complaints you have about others. Yet God says that until we can learn to love others fully God's love is not perfected within us. I don't know about you, but I find one of the most challenging aspects of my faith is the idea that the way to truly love God is to love others. That is hard work. It is work that I fail at more times than I would like to admit. I don't like the image that anytime I am angry with another, hold a grudge against another, or am filled with hate towards another because of their actions I am not loving God. Ouch. We love God. We want to separate our actions towards others from our response to God. But John says they are linked. The better we love our brother and sister the more perfect we are and the more we are able to embrace God's love and acceptance, the better prepared we are to face that day of judgement.

But we still need help for the day to day fears that beset us. We want some way to deal with them. I think there is some great advice in this passage to help God's perfect love drive out fear.

The first of these is the reminder that God is with us. At first you might think, what does this have to do with conquering fear. I think of my interactions with Sophi. There are times when she is afraid of something. I then come alongside her and the fear diminishes or disappears. Having her grandpa standing beside her makes whatever had been scary to her no longer seem like such a big deal. I see the same happening in our relationship with God. When something is causing me to fear, if I only think about dealing with it using my resources, the fear gets bigger and more consuming. But when I recall God is with me, God loves me and that nothing that will happen can separate me

from the love of God, my fears decrease in intensity and sometimes disappear. I realize that I can do nothing about this situation; it is in God's hands, so why worry?

Secondly, John realizes that one of the ways that fear is diminished is through a community of faith that supports us as we have supported the community. He talks about how we grow in love by learning to love our brother or sister. I see it as even more dynamic. As we strive to love those around us we begin to also trust their love for us. We feel good about helping and seeing how our love has helped another. This means that we should also be willing and ready to reach out and accept that love from others when we are going through a scary place. But this can be a problem. I know many a person who is good at giving love and support but unwilling to receive it. Then, when the difficult times come along they strive to handle it on their own and that is a very scary place. Hear John's call to love your brother and sister. But we also have to be willing to let others love and care for us. So don't try to handle the difficult things on your own. Reach out to a community that you love and loves you. When you know others are praying for you, with you, and care about you, it does help God to drive out the fear that has been gripping your heart.

Getting back to the theme of John's letter we need to realize that ultimately it will be o.k. for us one way or the other. So much of our fear is about the unknown or more likely, the loss of control in our lives and the lives of those around us. But knowing God is with us should give us some peace and allow us the freedom to live, knowing we will die in God's love.

I have seen this lived out so many times in my ministry. I am called to a home to visit with a family and to help them process very distressing health news. Usually they have heard words like terminal, hospice, inoperable or other such words. Fear is gripping the individual and the family. But fear does not always win. I think of a situation where the matriarch of the family was told those words, "you have just a few months to live." I was called and the scene was as emotional as you would expect. After visiting a bit and having a prayer she talked to me and said, "You will be with me over the next months?" After hearing my affirmative she went on, "and you will be with my husband and family after I am gone?" Again my affirmative. Then she looked at her family and said, "It is going to be o.k. The church is with us and will be with you. Instead of focusing

on my dying let's figure out how to enjoy and make the most out of the time we have left." Her words had the effect of sucking up all of those negative emotions. Were they sad, yes, would they grieve, yes, but they realized they still had some time to live. She and her husband spent the next few weeks making some special moments for their children and grandchildren.

Now we might wish it was different, how our lives might play out. None of us want to face some things and we are fearful about them. But ultimately when we place our trust in God and in the community of faith that we love and loves us, we can live in love and not give into fear. This is our goal and our reward.