

## **Sermon for September 20, 2015**

So what do you think is one of the most often said phrases in the Bible? Got one in mind? Its one form or another of the phrase, “Don’t be afraid.” This phrase has been used by angels, prophets, leaders and Jesus himself. In fact he could have used it as part of today’s reading. Jesus has just finished telling the disciples for the second time about his upcoming suffering, death and resurrection. “But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

Fear, it can either paralyze us into doing nothing such as with the disciples in the first part of our reading—they were too afraid to ask Jesus any questions; or it can make us act rashly and impulsively; looking out for only ourselves as the disciples were doing as they walked along the way trying to decide who was going to be their leader once Jesus was gone.

This reading is a great example of the relationship between faith and fear. Many of us would give the opposite of faith as doubt, but especially in Mark’s gospel the opposite of faith is fear. After Jesus stills the storm where the disciples had been terrified that they were going to die; Jesus asks them, “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” As Jesus is going to bring Jairus’ daughter back to life he tells the father, “Do not fear, only believe.” At the end of Mark when the angel tells the women to go and tell the disciples that Jesus has risen their response is this, “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were

afraid.” The type of fear that paralyzes, distorts and drives us to despair is the opposite of faith.

Fear is all around us and many advertisers use it to their advantage. We fear being alone so they tell us to use their dating site and find the one person who is right for us. We fear not fitting in so we’re told to buy their clothes, their cologne or perfume, their car and we’ll be with the in-crowd. We fear aging, failing health and dying so we’re told to buy their supplements, use their weight loss products, do their exercise programs and we’ll live longer and better lives.

Even in the church we’re surrounded by fear. We fear if they’ll be enough money for the budget. We fear that we will lose more people to the big churches in the city. We fear that others won’t want to join a smaller church. We fear that those who do belong won’t find the time to participate in our ministries. With these kinds of fear we can become paralyzed and hold everything that God has given to us even tighter or we can become so fearful that we rush around trying anything new.

We all have fears. Some of mine may be the same as some of yours—because I’m also a pastor some of mine may be different. I fear the struggles that will happen within my family when my parents die and my brother has to buy the farm. I fear for my health. I fear if I’ll ever pay off my student loans and be able to retire. I fear that I am not making a difference. I fear the type of world we are leaving for future generations. I fear not living up to the promises that I made to God at my confirmation and my ordination.

Jesus' response to our fears is an invitation not to faith as a belief, but to faith as a movement, faith as taking a step—no matter how small—in spite of doubt and fear, faith as doing even the smallest thing in the hope and trust of God's promises. As Jesus probes into the depths of the disciples fears and anxieties he overturns the prevailing assumptions about power and security by inviting the disciples to imagine that abundant life comes not through exhibiting power, but by displaying vulnerability, not through accomplishments but through service, not by having powerful friends but by welcoming children.

When we think about it these are small things we can do, but they aren't insignificant—when we serve others, when we are honest about our own needs and fears, when we show kindness to those who are vulnerable, when we welcome a stranger—these things are available to all of us each and every day. And each time we take even the smallest step out in faith; we find the strength and courage to reach out to another in compassion even when we are afraid. But every time we do it we find our fear lessened and our confidence increased and we begin to truly believe that fear and death don't have the last word.

Fear blinds us to God's action in the world and it's really easy to think that God is no longer at work, but when we join in God's work in even the smallest of ways; we realize that the God who created everything out of nothing, who created light out of darkness and who created life out of death by raising Jesus from the dead is still at work keeping us from being overwhelmed by our fears and helping us to move forward in faith.

So what I would like us to do today is to take the piece of paper you were given with your bulletin. On one side we will write down one of our fears. Then we will say a silent prayer and on the other side we will write down one small step we can take this week in faith—it doesn't even have to be a step related to your fear—just a step, for any step in faith helps to give us confidence. Then fold this paper up and keep it with you to remind you what you can do in faith this week. Each small step adds up!