

“Love over Fear”  
May 26, 2024  
Scripture: Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

To understand the significance of Paul’s words in this passage from Romans, it helps to know a little about the world in which he lived. Roman society was rigid and for common people unforgiving. It was dangerous to stray away from your station, whether it was as a slave or merchant or a soldier or, certainly, as a woman. In the Empire of Rome order was maintained through fear and coercion. Any conquered country was made to understand very quickly what was expected of them. And rebellion was met with brutal assault.

There were all sorts of justifications for that, of course, but all of them were rooted in the fundamental belief that Rome and its people were superior to all other nations. So, other nations were destined to serve Rome’s needs. And as the Empire expanded those needs grew larger and larger. Feeding the Roman war machine was the reason for the existence of other nations. Rome drained them of their resources and tribute, everything they could produce was the property of Caesar.

So for Paul to bring this message of living for something else, something bigger and more lasting even than the Empire, was a pretty bold move. In his letters he is constantly encouraging the members of these communities to look beyond their own needs and think of themselves as citizens of a new world. That couldn’t have been an easy perspective to adopt. In a society where they were surrounded, especially in Rome itself, with the propaganda of the Empire, all the institutions dedicated to the state religion of Caesar-worship, removing themselves from all of it meant removing themselves from all the relationships that made it possible for them to survive. How frightening must that have been for them?

This is not a minor adjustment they had to make. The faith Paul taught was, and is, all—encompassing. We have trouble imagining this because we live in a world that’s largely friendly to faith. Not to say there aren’t challenges but no one is going to arrest us or expel us from our homes because of the religion we practice. In our country we’re free to practice as much or as little of our faith as we choose. The only pressures on us may come from family or peers but not the government. That’s as it should be. Religious freedom is a foundational principle for us. But it didn’t exist in Paul’s world.

When Paul tells the Christians in Rome, “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery so you could fall back into fear but you have received a spirit of adoption,” he’s encouraging them to look at the world through a new lens. The Empire relies on fear to keep people in line, to maintain order. The state religion is based in the belief that we humans are slaves to the gods and their chief representative on earth is Caesar. So, they are enslaved to Caesar. Paul isn’t interested in replacing one form of enslavement for another. He tells them, “No, you are not God’s slaves; you are God’s children.” And Christ, God’s chief representative on earth is not your master but your brother. They are “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.”

The question is, can they shake off the fear in whose shadow they've lived all their lives and embrace the love being offered in Christ.

The reality is fear is a powerful motivator. And people who have been conditioned to live in the context of fear often find it hard to let it go. Take Nicodemus, for instance. Here's a person described as a teacher of Israel, a Pharisee who was among the governing elite of Jerusalem. Yet even he can only bring himself to approach Jesus by night. There's some debate over whether Nicodemus is sincere in his questions to Jesus or if he's trying to entrap him. I think he's sincere. I think Nicodemus is dissatisfied with the interpretation of Torah and the motive for following it that's become popular among his colleagues. When he approaches Jesus he seems to be asking about Jesus' authority. He doesn't pay him some hollow compliment, I think he really wants to get at the heart of Jesus' message.

Nicodemus is at a crossroad. He's re-thinking his understanding of the faith. What Jesus says is challenging because it requires Nicodemus to see the world from a new perspective, a new paradigm; that's what Jesus means when he says we must be "born from above." As we see, though, they're talking past one another. Nicodemus is stuck in the earth-bound categories of right and wrong. His life is hemmed in by fear. But if he can let go and realize, as Torah teaches, that God is motivated by love and not retribution, then he can begin to see the world anew, from the Spirit side of things, as if he were born all over again.

We were made for love and not fear. This is the message Jesus proclaims over and over through his ministry and teaching. And finally, through the kind of death he endures. You notice Paul does place one condition on our new status as "joint heirs with Christ." He says, "if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him." Love and suffering go together. That's not a very popular idea but it's one we all know is true. Ask any parent who has seen their child go down a destructive path; we suffer when we see our children hurting because our love for them is so deep. Jesus' death, brutal as it is, is how God experiences suffering for the life of the world, not to condemn but to save.

I've mentioned from time to time how often this verse from John's gospel is misused. It's sort of a gift with a catch. But I don't think it's intended to be. God's love for the world, revealed in Christ, is available to anyone able to trust it. It's always available. And when we do put our trust in God's love, we are freed from fear. And because we are free from fear, we can love the world as God does. We can take on the world's suffering, make it our own, and stand with those who are vulnerable or rejected, the lonely and lost. That's how we suffer with Christ and become joint heirs of God's kingdom.

It would be so much simpler to do none of it. It would be so much easier for Nicodemus if he just stayed in the dark. For the people Paul writes it would be so much better for them, in the short term, to just go along with their neighbors and conform. But once we're exposed to the possibility of love overcoming fear, once we realize God isn't interested in enslaving us but wants to embrace us, how can we go back? How can we possibly settle for living in fear when love is right there waiting for us? When we hear all the calls to conform, to ban books or close borders or condemn certain people for their gender identity or their religion or their origin, and

all of it rooted in fear, how can we who know God's love, who have tasted its sweetness, how can we stay silent? We cannot fall back into fear.

Only love can save us. God's love for us and God's love through us. You are God's children, no longer afraid and ready to love.

Amen