

Church on the Mall  
May 10, 2015  
Rev. Sarah A. Colwill  
1 John 5:1-6  
John 15:9-17

“Abiding – part 2”

I am privileged to be the mother of two elementary-aged children. Nathan is 9 and Julia is 5. For those of you who have met Julia, it doesn't take long to figure out that she has a lot of energy and a spark in her that makes her a bit feisty and determined. It is a quality I love as a parent and also frustrates at times. When she was about 3 or 4, I remember heading off to who knows where, leaving the house in a hurry, shooing everyone in the car to get going. I was buckling Julia up in her car seat and she began to protest. And so, I began with reason: Well, Julia, we buckle up for safety, every time we're in the car just in case something would happen. Nope. Not convinced. The protesting continued. Well, Julia, sometimes cars get in accidents and run into each other and we want to protect this precious body of yours that God gave you, so we use the seat belt to help do that. Nope. Not convinced. Well, Julia, if we get in an accident and the cars crash into each other when they're going really fast and you're not buckled, you might break bones or get really bad cuts and scrapes and boo-boos. Nope. Not convinced. Julia, if you don't wear your seat belt you could get very hurt, very seriously hurt. Ok, Julia, if you don't put this on you will actually die. You will be dead. 100% chance that you will die if you don't buckle up. My attempts at reason

gradually progressed into using all out fear. And why? Because it's a cheap motivator and a great way to manipulate people into doing something you want them to do.

A friend of mine recently had her third child, and I visited her the following day at the hospital. In making new baby conversation, I asked if the baby slept in the nursery overnight or right there in her room with her and her husband. Apparently she was craving uninterrupted sleep (wanting the baby to be in the nursery), but her husband was wanting closeness with his newborn in these precious and sometimes uncertain first hours of life – he wanted him to sleep in the room with them just so they could keep a close watch. She admitted somewhat sheepishly, “Well, I told John (her husband) that if the baby was in the nursery he'd have more people watching over him, you know, just in case anything might happen.” While her argument made sense, she knew that fear would motivate her spouse more than her simple desire to get some sleep.

These are two, somewhat benign examples, but also very telling of just how easy it is to resort to fear when we want to motivate someone to do something. Because it works. While my examples of the seatbelt and the baby sleeping in the nursery have good intentions – I wanted Julia to be safe wearing her seatbelt and my friend just wanted some sleep – what happens when intentions are not good? What happens when the end result is not so harmless? Our end results were a buckled seat belt and a baby in the hospital nursery. What happens when the end results are not good? Fear is a powerful motivator. And while it may be the easy way out for getting people to do every day things, fear can be used with far more damaging and harmful results. It can

convince rational, sane, thoughtful people to do rash, outlandish things that go against their principles.

We have these calm, ordered ethics and morals, ways we treat people and how we chose to interact with the world. But get us scared, and that all goes right out the window. Once we feel like our lives or our safety or our children are in danger, we will do almost anything. Peaceful people will promote violence. Generous people will hunker down and keep everything they own to themselves. Loving people will hate their enemies. Creative problem solvers will circle the wagons and do whatever it takes to protect their families. Whatever it takes. Get someone scared and you can convince them to do pretty much anything. When that animal instinct of fear is triggered, our reactions tend to be impulsive, self-protective, and out of line with our everyday ethics and values.

I recently bought a new car and part of the paper-signing included warranty after warranty, all those add-ons that they try to get you to buy. One of them was named “Peace of Mind” warranty that protects the car’s interior from spills or something. I tried to joke with the salesperson that I was a pastor and my peace of mind came from something else. He didn’t think my joke was that funny. But really – they were trying to actually sell peace of mind. Apparently everything really can be bought, or so we are convinced to believe.

Both the Gospel of John and the three letters titled 1, 2, and 3 John are believed to have been written by the same person. If not the same author, they certainly share the

same writing style and theology. Last week our Gospel lesson spoke of abiding in Jesus, the true vine. If we are to bear good fruit, we need to stay close to Jesus and make our home in him. This week, the analogy is explained further: if we are to abide in Jesus, we need to abide in love. The writer intertwines abiding Jesus, abiding in love, and obeying Jesus' commands. To do any one is to do all three. There is a relational quality to these three things – following Jesus is abiding in love which is living out his commands. Living out his commands is to abide in love which is to abide in Jesus. Loving one another is living out his commands which is abiding in Jesus.

I want to pick up something from that first letter of John that we read last week; it's chapter 4, verse 18: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear..." That verse has been nagging at me all week. Even though the lectionary has moved on, I feel pressed to go back to it. "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear..." When Jesus tells his disciples in our Gospel reading this morning to abide in his love, to love one another as he has loved them, that there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends – he is heading to the cross. This takes place in what is known as The Farewell Discourse, after his final entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday but before his arrest and crucifixion. Jesus is about to take up the cross – the greatest love that can be offered for us, his friends.

There are books upon books and opinions upon opinions on the meaning of the cross – and it's okay that we are not all of the same mind. But I believe that Jesus could have chosen fear. Sitting in that upper room with the disciples, he knew that his arrest

was coming, he could've left in the secrecy of the darkness, fled in the middle of the night. Fear of death and shame and humiliation could have motivated him to disengage, back away, and give up; to rationalize his way out of the cross. But because of the perfect love that he has for the world, that he has for all the world, that he has for you and for me, he went to the cross. Not motivated by fear, but motivated by love; not motivated by just obedience, or just his destiny, but motivated by love – a love that casts out fear. The cross reveals to us the intensity and depth of the love he has for us. He didn't give in to fear. He chose love. He chose us. Even when that meant agonizing pain, a shameful death, and the humiliation of his own friends. He chose love. He chose us.

God's power is revealed to us in the power of the cross. It is a power of perfect love that casts out all fear. When we are motivated by love, we act out of that same power; we tap into that same power. When we are motivated by love, we respond from a position of great strength. When we are motivated by fear, we act out of a position of weakness and vulnerability. Our fear-based decisions are not good ones. They are reactive, instinctive, self-protective, and cowardly. They think about survival and safety, they lack the conviction to think beyond ourselves, let alone our faith. Our love-based decisions are the best ones. They are responsive, caring, and courageous. They think about what impact will come to other people and the greater good. When we are motivated by love, we are abiding in Jesus and our decisions are faithful and bold.

And what about our faith? How about the fear tactics that are used to convince people to become Christian? Although our destiny and ultimate fate is left to God and God alone...although we are told that God is love...although we read that Jesus came for the salvation of all the world – how easy is it for some to use the fear of hell and eternal damnation to motivate people to become Christians? Rather than preach the love that God shows us on the cross; rather than preach the grace that God pours out in endless forgiveness; rather than talk about the personal relationship one can have with Jesus Christ who chooses us to do his work in the world – even we Christians are known for using the cheap tactic of fear.

While at Penn State for undergrad I attended a campus ministry small group that had about 6-8 of us gathered in someone's dorm room. The discussion was led by one of the students. The entire hour-long session, the first one, the introductory one, was a long reading about the terrors of hell – it's like falling down into a pit, but you never stop falling; it's total darkness, wretched pain. The leader was using every possible way to invoke anxiety and terror in us. That was the motivation – just fear and self-protection. If you don't want that misery, you better choose Christianity. If we chose to be Christian that day, it was from a position of great weakness. It wasn't about loving God and neighbor or working for God's kingdom. That day, our motivation was survival and freedom from agony and pain. It was cheap evangelism.

Fortunately my church upbringing was enough to bring me to my senses and know that the choice to be a Christian was actually a response to Jesus choosing me first

to be his disciple. And my motivation was not self-protection from bodily harm and great anxiety – my motivation was the desire to help bring about God’s kingdom to the world and have a lifelong relationship with a Savior who loves me. And sometimes being a Christian meant risking our safety and our own personal security. Sometimes being a Christian called us to lay down our lives for our friends. We don’t need to rely on cheap evangelism to talk to the world about our faith. We don’t need to scare people into believing.

Throughout the Gospels, God implores us – Do not be afraid. Whether it’s angels coming to shepherds or the Risen Jesus by the empty tomb. Do not be afraid. Perfect love casts out all fear. When we make decisions, be weary of the powerful motivator – from car warranties to the situations in Ferguson and Baltimore to the Ebola outbreak – are our thoughts, feelings, and actions motivated by love? Or are they motivated by fear?

We are strong and we are faithful and we are impassioned and courageous when we are motivated by love. We abide in Jesus and follow his commands when we abide in love. Perfect love casts out fear. There is no fear in love. From our everyday decisions to our big overarching morals and values, our strength and power as Christians taps into that power of the cross that is a power of deep, deep, selfless love that risks life for the sake of the Gospel, that sacrifices ease and happiness and comfort in order to bring about God’s kingdom. Our best, strongest, most faithful choices come when we are motivated by that love. May we, as a church, encourage one another to act

from that place of deep love and not fear. May we, as a church, encourage one another to be brave and courageous, knowing that Jesus Christ has not scared us into faith but has chosen each one of us to reveal his perfect love to the world. Thanks be to God.  
Amen.