

From Fear to Love

Sermon preached by Rev. Dean J. Snyder
at Foundry United Methodist Church
9:30 service, Sunday, September 8, 2002

I John 4:16-21

Like many of us after last September 11th, I kept so busy for three weeks, or a month, that I did not have time to think or feel much.

And then about three weeks or a month later, as things began to slow down, I began to have these strange and uncontrollable thoughts and feelings. Sometimes when I would lay in bed, at night trying to go to sleep, and sleep wouldn't come, I would hear a noise outside of our home and thoughts would flash involuntarily into my mind of a bomb exploding somewhere. My body would involuntarily stiffen and my muscles would tense and I would wait for the explosion to come and find me.

In those days I was commuting between our home in Capitol Hill and Columbia, Maryland, where our Baltimore-Washington Conference offices are. Sometimes in the morning, uncontrollably and involuntarily, as I would be sitting on Independence Avenue, waiting for a red light to change, a thought would flash into my mind of a nuclear bomb exploding behind me in Capitol Hill. And I would imagine myself racing as fast as I could in my Honda Accord to escape the fireball expanding. But even in my mind, I could not drive fast enough to outrun the fireball.

About a year and a half ago, when I was working as director of communications for the United Methodist offices in this region, I went to the bishop and said that we needed to get a satellite. I've got this feeling, I said, and I'm not a prophet nor am I the son of a prophet, but I've got this feeling, that something is going to happen and we're going to need to be able to get CNN. And so we got a satellite for the conference offices and on September 11th someone who was watching the news on the internet told us that we should turn on CNN as the building was about to gather for worship.

So I saw the activities of September 11th via CNN as they happened. There was one scene that I wished I had not seen. Fortunately, I don't think CNN showed it more than once or twice. I hesitate to even name it in church in front of the altar of God because it feels like an almost sacrilegious thing. There was a scene in which CNN showed people jumping from the South Tower. I couldn't understand why people would jump and it was a puzzle in my mind, except that people were faced with the alternative of death by burning or another moment of life by leaping into a thousand feet of empty air. That thought has stayed with me and come into my mind often when I'm about ready to enter the elevator of a building.

Also, flying in an airplane for the first, and the second, and the third time after September 11th left me sore from tensing my body. Sometimes I only realize it when I get off of the plane.

Now, what I want to be clear about is this: When we commemorate September 11th, our first concerns and our first prayers are for those who were most directly impacted and who lost loved ones. Last year, it was part of my responsibility to express the condolences of the Baltimore- Washington Conference to the Cooper family who are members of Hughes Memorial United Methodist Church in north west Washington. I just got a copy of our conference newspaper this week and on the cover is a picture of little Julianah

Cooper, who was born six months after her father died. Julian Cooper died last September 11 in the Pentagon. Also, there is a story in the newspaper about 4-year-old Stephan Young, member of one of our United Methodist Churches, whose father was on Flight 77. Stephen Young's grandmother, Margaret Young who is a very committed person of faith, says about Stephen, 4 "In Sunday School, he [Stephan] is taught about God, Jesus and heaven, but at times he just really wants his dad."

So, as we commemorate September 11th, we remember first of all, and pray first of all, for those who suffered the most pain and grief. It doesn't go away in a year. There are members of Foundry Church who lost dearly beloved ones last September 11th. We remember them first. Our pain is secondary to theirs.

And, then, those who remind us that there is great pain and suffering and terror all over the face of the earth are also right. They truly are right. People in the Middle East have, year in and year out, suffered great fear and terror and violence. Day in and day out, they live in that mood of terror all the time.

The Rwandan genocide received very little attention in the United States. The press paid little attention. I was working with the church press at that time and we paid little attention. In the Rwandan genocide there were days that 30,000 people, in one day, were brutally slaughtered! Imagine this kind of terror happening during our life time. We, who talk about the Nazi holocaust, lived through one ourselves, and most of us were barely aware of it. There is great terror happening to people over the face of the earth.

I have a friend, Rev. Victor Sawyer, who was born in Sierra Leone. Victor goes back to his homeland about once a year. Victor brought back for me photographs after his last trip of children whose arms and legs had been cut off with machetes so that they would never be part of an uprising, so that they would never be able to fight battles, or fight in wars. People live with terror all over the face of the earth.

Last September 12th, the day after September 11th, one of our United Methodist missionaries who was home on furlough ran into me. I guess she thought it was a teachable moment. She was trying to tell me, in a conversation, how much people in other places in the world suffer as a result of U.S. policies and practices and as a result of the business practices that we are involved in and support. I thanked her for her sharing, but last September 12th I told her I just really couldn't listen to it today.

But she is absolutely right. We who are among the wealthiest and most affluent elite of the world are responsible for great suffering. As we remember last September 11th this should not cause us to be numb to the vast numbers of people around the world who live with violence and terror every day.

Even those who are living untreated with AIDS are experiencing a form of terror. Even neglect can be an act of terror. Those who remind us of those things are absolutely right.

But still, having said all that, there are nights when I have a hard time going to sleep without thinking about the potential of violence on Capitol Hill where I live. There is an uneasy sense of anxiety and fear that I live with. I bring those feelings to worship this morning, as I hope you bring whatever feelings and thoughts remain in your hearts and minds from last September 11th. I bring those feelings, this morning, into the presence of God, as I hope you do.

Since last September 11th, I've thought again and again about the passage from I John 4. This may be the most famous passage in all of Scripture about fear. What it says is this: "There is no fear in love." It says "perfect love casts out fear."

As I've been thinking about that passage from time to time over the last year, trying to think through and to process my own fears and anxieties, I've come to realize that this is a sort of strange way of talking about

fear. If I had been assigned to write the Bible, this is not what I would have said. I wouldn't have said that love cast out fear. What I would have said is that faith casts out fear. What I would have said is that if we believe enough in God, if we believe hard enough in the omnipotence and sovereignty of God, if we really trust that God is in control of the universe, and that there is an eternity which rests in God's hand, if we only have enough faith, if we only have enough belief, and if we only believe hard enough, then our faith would cast out fear. Believing in God, and trusting in God, and being convinced that God is on the throne, and that God is in control would cast out fear. If I could only bring myself to really, really believe, that I wouldn't fear. But that is not what I John says.

What I John says is that love casts out fear. That abiding in the love of God, that allowing ourselves to experience, and to receive God's love toward us is what is stronger than fear and what overcomes fear. What conquers fear, what casts out fear, is learning to abide in the love of God, and learning how to love each other. I John says that you can't love God without loving your brother or sister. You can't love God whom you can't see without loving the brother and sister that you can see. So, what I John says is that it is not believing that overcomes fear, but it is in abiding God's love and allowing God to love us.

That's not the way I would have written it.

Rev. Keith Beasley-Topliffe, who is a son of this congregation, has written a wonderful book called "Surrendering to God: Praying the Covenant Prayer." It's based on John Wesley's New Year's Eve Covenant Prayer. In the book Keith talks about an experience that he had that I'm grateful he was willing to write down and talk about in public. He talks about attending a pastor's school at Albright College in Reading, Pennsylvania. One night when classes were being held, he didn't feel particularly well. So, instead of going to the session, he stayed in his room. He was studying and reading, he says, and trying to understand prayer, trying to grasp, intellectually prayer. As he was in his room, not feeling well, all by himself, as he was reading and thinking about prayer, he says he suddenly felt arms surrounding him from in back of him, holding him for just an instant in a bear-hug, and then letting him go. He turned around and the room was empty. He says that this experience convinced him over, and over, again when he had reason to doubt it, that God really does love him.

The United Methodist Church says that our faith is based on four things -- the Wesley quadrilateral. Our faith is based on scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Often we put experience at the bottom of the list. We often put experience at the bottom of the list as though religious experiences, mystical experiences, experiences of the presence of God and of the love of God, as though those were a little strange and unusual. If we talk about those things, people are going to think that we're a little strange.

But the kind of experience that Keith publicly admits in his book is the great need in our hearts today, and in this time - that we would open ourselves to actually experience and know the presence of the love of God. Because it is not figuring out our theology and what we believe that will conquer the fear that we experience but instead opening ourselves to the strange bear-hugs of God.

When we experience the love of another person, we're also experiencing the love of God. We need to have the experience as well as the knowledge and the tradition and the reason. The experience of the love of God is that thing that will finally overcome our fear.

This morning we invite you to a ritual of healing. You are invited to sit in your pew this morning as long as you want to. Then when you're ready, come and kneel at the altar. After you've been anointed, leave when you're ready. I invite you in your heart, and your mind, and your spirit and your will, as you feel the oil anointing you this morning, to know that you are loved by God, and to surrender to it, and to let the love of God conquer and cast out the fears of our hearts.

