



## “The Secret of Life: 4. Facing Down Fear”

Texts: Psalm 56 and 1 Peter 3:13-17

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

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Some of the things that continue to amaze and amuse me are the reports of young parents about the fears their children possess. Even more amusing are the reports of the fears of adults. Small children are often afraid of the vacuum cleaner, prompting one grandmother to remark, “Well, perhaps if they heard it a little more...” I’ve heard wonderful stories of children running to hide when an inflated balloon is let go and flies around a room until it crashes to the floor. There was a high schooler in one of my youth groups who was afraid of bridges. And I know more than a few adults who are frightened of clowns.

What makes those fears and others so humorous to some of us is that they are apparently irrational. We think it through and wonder how anyone could be afraid of a vacuum cleaner, or a balloon, or a bridge. None of those things have any real power to cause us harm. Still, they seem to frighten and scare.

Some fears are well-founded and are meant to protect us. The “fight or flight” response is a holdover from our evolutionary process. Some things frighten us and we run from them. Other things frighten us and we stand our ground and fight.

When you are hiking in bear country, and you come across a bear, your instinctive response might be to run. I mean, who wants to be near a bear? But the better response is to stand still and make a loud noise. It will startle the bear and the bear will usually run away from you. Running away from the bear is simply an invitation for the bear to chase you.

Pena Chodron, the Buddhist nun and author, tells the story of her teacher visiting a monastery high in the mountains that was guarded by a vicious dog. The dog barked and bawled as the teacher and his assistants approached the monastery. Suddenly, the dog broke the chain that held him and he headed right toward the visitors. The teacher's assistants ran away from the dog. The teacher ran right at the dog, barking and howling at it. The dog was so frightened that it ran away and hid.

Let's begin with this statement: fear is real. The fifteen most common fears are:

- Claustrophobia - the fear of close spaces
- Dentophobia - the fear of dentists
- Glossophobia - the fear of public speaking
- Arachnophobia - the fear of spiders
- Agoraphobia - the fear of crowds
- Gephyrophobia - the fear of bridges
- Hemophobia - the fear of blood
- Ornithophobia - the fear of birds
- Aquaphobia - the fear of water
- Acrophobia - the fear of heights
- Pyrophobia - the fear of fire
- Nomophobia - the fear of not having your cell phone
- Cyberphobia - the fear of computers and digital technology
- Cynophobia - the fear of dogs
- Nyctophobia - the fear of the dark

These fears are real to those who suffer from them. They cause anxiety, worry, and intense fear. They sap away the joy of living. They reduce and diminish the gift of life that God has given us.

In 1949, Rogers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* appeared on Broadway. Nine years later it was made into a movie. In the story, Lieutenant Cable, who has fallen in love with a Polynesian girl named Liat, sings about how his relationship will never be accepted back home. He sings these words:

You've got to be taught to hate and fear,  
You've got to be taught from year to year  
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear  
You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught to be afraid  
Of people whose eyes are oddly made  
And people whose skin is a different shade  
You've got to be carefully taught

You've got to be taught before it's too late  
Before you are six or seven or eight  
To hate all the people your relatives hate  
You've got to be carefully taught.

The producers told Rodgers and Hammerstein that if they included that song in the show, it might well mean that the show would be a flop. According to one article:

While the show was on a tour of the Southern United States, lawmakers in Georgia introduced a bill outlawing entertainment containing “an underlying philosophy inspired by Moscow.” One legislator said that “a song justifying interracial marriage was implicitly a threat to the American way of life.” Rodgers and Hammerstein defended their work strongly. James Michener, upon whose stories South Pacific was based, recalled, “The authors replied stubbornly that this number represented why they had wanted to do this play, and that even if it meant the failure of the production, it was going to stay in.”

In earlier days, and in our own, fear has become weaponized. There are those who are telling us of whom we should be afraid. We are told to be afraid to Muslims. We are to be afraid of immigrants. We are told to be afraid of people whose skin is brown or black. We are told to be afraid of anyone who does not fall in lock-step with the political and societal leanings of the day.

As a result we divide into tribes and packs and then we attack. We live in fear of the other - our neighbors - the very people we are called by Jesus Christ to love. We become less and less human. We bear less and less of the image of God in which all people are created. We deface the goodness and wonder of creation with hatred, contempt, and fear.

We have been taught to hate and fear. We have been taught from year to year. It has been drummed in our dear little ears. We have been carefully taught.

The people to whom the First Letter of Peter was written were probably people who had experienced significant persecution for their faith in Jesus Christ. They probably knew people who had been martyred for their faith. They lived in no small amount of justifiable fear.

To them, the letter was sent, saying, “Who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.”

To a people who lived in a fear we will never know, God’s word was “Do not fear what they fear and do not be intimidated...” Such fear has no place in the people of God. God is love and, as we are told, “perfect love casts out fear.” Fear is the antithesis of love and strangles the life-giving breath of faith.

Fear of the other, fear of ideas, fear of someone who loves differently from you, fear of someone whose skin color is different from your own, fear of the foreigner who lives among us, fear of those who are running for their lives - these fears and so many more have no place in the heart, faith, and life of God's people.

When we fully embrace the call to faith, when we truly live as people created in the image of God, when we give ourselves to loving our neighbors, when we reject the lessons of hatred and fear that the world is more than ready to teach us - we will enter into the fullness of life - a life of joy, fulfillment, and peace.

That is a lesson I have learned from the happiest and most contented people I have ever known. They have faced down fear and overcome it. They will not participate in teaching another to hate and fear. They teach the lessons of love, not just in words, but in action.

What causes you fear? Are you ready to be done with it?

God is always with us. And as the angels always seem to say whenever God breaks into our world, "Do not be afraid."

"Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord."

Do not be afraid. For now and evermore. Amen.



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