

Sunday, April 11, 2021

Sermon: How to Unlock Fear

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A while ago, my wife decided that our family should go to an animal park. I love animal parks. I love seeing animals but at this animal park there is a zipline. You had to purchase tickets before going to the park in order to go on the zipline. My wife knows that I have a fear of heights, so she asked me if I would like to go on the zipline. I've had a New Year's resolution for the last five years to face my fears, including my fear of heights. So, I said yes. I looked at the pictures and the zipline didn't look that high. I thought, yeah, I need to face this and I need to deal with my fear of heights. I remind myself to be rational and I see nobody has ever fallen from this zipline, it's going to be okay. I try to cope with my fear to soothe myself through my fear and I say, yes, let's do that. We get to the animal park and we climb up to the zipline. My oldest son says dad, there's a 74-year-old grandma who's doing this with her eight-year-old grandson - you can do this! I think to myself, that's not helping. We climb up and in my mind I think to myself that I need to go first. I need to go first so that my family can cheer me on, so that's what I do.

This person who is strapping all of us in asks who wants to go first? And Abbie raises her hand and she says I'm first! So she goes first and then my other two children say, "I'm next! I'm next!" And then my wife goes. And I am there all alone as I am strapped into this zipline and I reassure myself again and again that nobody has ever fallen from this, you're going to be okay. And the guy who straps me in says, "You're ready to go!" And I said, "No I'm not." He said he would check all of the points that are holding me up and tighten them and reassure me and I said, "Yes, please do that." But I knew I was just stalling. He did it all then strapped me all up again, tightened everything, and I froze. I couldn't do it. Something inside of me, the butterflies, the knots, the whatever it was that got inside of me when it comes to this fear of heights, and it had me frozen. I couldn't move.

So, my family continued on the zipline course and I watched them from below cheering them on as best I could. Then they finished and they gave me hugs. My middle child, Gavin, came up to me after – I felt like such a failure that I didn't experience this with them – Gavin came up to me and said, "I'm proud of you, dad. You tried."

I tell you that story because it's just the fear of heights, it's okay. There are things that I'm much more afraid of than fear of heights. I don't know about you but one of the things that I am most afraid of is being defined by some of the worst things that I've ever done. Some of the things that I am afraid of is being defined by how I have sometimes abandoned people, how I have sometimes betrayed friends, family members, church members, I am even deathly afraid of this time during the pandemic and how it has isolated so many of us. And how it's so hard to stay in community with some members of our congregation. It is a joy to be here with one another week after week but it is also painful to know that I haven't seen certain church members in more than a year face-to-face, it's really hard and I know that many of you are experiencing this, too.

It feels like we're in a kind of new stage of this pandemic that is eating at me more and more where we are told that the more that we get vaccinated, the more likely it is that we can get together, and yet we can't get together. It's hard. It's just really hard. It's really, really, hard and so those are some of the great fears and

transitions that Abbie was talking about earlier. Things that we're expecting and that they're not here yet and sometimes I just want to cry. It is helpful to know, for me, that I'm not alone, that many of you are feeling the same way, that we struggle through it together and that this struggle is part of our faith tradition. I have struggled too. I've struggled to be a pastor during this time in ways that I never thought I would struggle.

The disciples in our story struggled to be disciples. They had just abandoned and betrayed their friend, Jesus, to the cross. They were stuck in fear of this transition. What's going to happen next? What happens is that Jesus shows up. Jesus shows up in their midst and he says to them, "Peace be with you."

Now, I don't know about you, but if I'm Jesus in this moment and I come back to these guys who have abandoned and betrayed me and didn't understand what I was talking about for the last three years, I might come back to them in all of my power and all of my God-given glory in the resurrection and I might have said to them, "You idiots! You fools! Why can't you ever understand what this is about? Here you are locked in this room living in fear." Some of you have been taught this image of God. I've been taught this image of God that if you turn your back on God, God is going to turn God's back on you. And so we live in fear of God because that's what we have been taught.

The disciples turned their back on Jesus. And how does God in Jesus respond to the disciples? Not by chastising them, not by calling them idiots, or fools, or losers. Not by giving up on them. Not by turning God's back on them. Jesus comes back into that locked room where they are locked in their own fear and what does Jesus say to them? "Peace be with you." That's what God is like. If you have ever heard the story that if you betray God, or abandon God or Jesus, that God is going to respond with wrath and anger and hell-fire and damnation. You don't have to believe that story because here on the second Sunday of Easter, we get the good news that God comes back to us and says, "Peace be with you."

Thomas can't believe it. What is it that Thomas can't believe? I think we get stuck in thinking that Thomas can't believe that Jesus rose from the dead. Maybe that's Thomas' doubt or maybe Thomas can't believe that God's love is that radical. Thomas can't believe that God's love is that forgiving. So what does God have to do in order to prove to Thomas that God loves Thomas? God shows up in his midst and says, "Look at my wounds."

You had some part to play in the wounding of God. And how does God respond to Thomas? With the most unbelievable thing that you can think of – peace be with you. And then Jesus breathes on them the Holy Spirit. What is the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is that aspect of God that binds us together as Rhonda and Dave and Jeff sang earlier. The Holy Spirit is the glue of love and forgiveness. Jesus says I breathe on you the Holy Spirit. You are now infused with the life of God. And what is the life of God? Not about power to harm others, not about power to be right and make other people wrong. Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on them. Jesus breathes God into them and says forgive, go out and forgive people because that is what God is like. And if you go out and forgive people they will know they are forgiven. But if you go out and you don't forgive people, then they won't know that they are forgiven. So your job is to share the love and the forgiveness of God.

Sometimes, whenever I talk about forgiveness I need to say it like this – sometimes forgiveness does not mean reconciliation with someone who has hurt you. Sometimes, forgiveness means creating space between you and someone else so that you aren't around somebody who has hurt you so badly. Sometimes, forgiveness means, as Jesus says earlier, get off your feet and move on from that relationship. And sometimes, it means reconciliation but either is an option.

So friends, it's a hard time. It's a hard time but I'm so glad that we are in this together. And it's also a joyful time as we enter into spring. Sometimes, the weight of the world, the weight of this pandemic can blind us to the sun, to the mountains here in Oregon, to the flowers that are blooming, to nature that sings of God's glory.

Friends, may our eyes be opened to the love of God in one another, the forgiveness of God, the peace of God that always returns to us and says there's more work to do. It says that there is fear but there's also love, there's also forgiveness, there's beauty throughout the world. May our eyes and our hearts be open to one another, to the beauty within one another, and within the world now and forever. Amen