

The Fifth Sunday after Trinity

1 Peter 3:8-15: "The Only Thing We Have to Fear Is the Lord."

July 11/12, 2020 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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O Lord God, heavenly Father: You are merciful, and through Christ promised us that You will neither judge nor condemn us, but graciously forgive us all our sins, and abundantly provide for all our wants of body and soul: We pray that by Your Holy Spirit You would establish in our hearts a confident faith in Your mercy, and teach us also to be merciful to our neighbor, that we may not judge or condemn others, but willingly forgive all, and, judging only ourselves, lead blessed lives in Your fear; through Your dear Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*, by Veit Dietrich, p. 159)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the third chapter of St. Peter's First Epistle. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. For *"Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." / Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.* ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who comforts us in our fears with the sure hope of salvation and eternal life, dear fellow redeemed:

A struggling economy. An unemployment rate in double figures. Plummeting crop prices. Unrest all across the country. This was the setting in 1933 when President Roosevelt gave his inaugural address. In the very first paragraph, he spoke words that have been repeated many times since: "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." He said that the collective fear of the population is a "nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."

He was on to something. He recognized that fear is not a thing we are made to feel or experience. It does not come at us from the outside; it wells up inside us. So for example, spiders or snakes do not possess the power to make you afraid. This is clear from the fact that not everyone is afraid of spiders or snakes. Those who are afraid of them don't like the way

they crawl or slither. They don't like coming across them unprepared. But ultimately, these animals are just a very small part of God's vast creation.

Sometimes our fears developed from a traumatic experience in our youth. This may explain the fear people have of going to the dentist or of sleeping without a light on. But dentists are not inherently bad, and the darkness of night does not mean you are unsafe. This is all clear enough in the daylight with no dentist's chair, snake, or spider present. But that doesn't stop us from being afraid when we do face these things.

We have other fears these days, some of the same ones that were on people's minds during the Great Depression. The economy is struggling. People are out of work. Demonstrations and riots are taking place across the country. A virus is spreading. There seem to be more questions at hand than answers. It won't do to have someone tell us to just stop being afraid. Fear is not something we can turn on and off like a light switch.

But it is possible to redirect our fear. This is very important today when fear threatens to overwhelm both us and the people in our communities. Fear can make us do irrational and harmful things. Have you ever injured yourself in an attempt to destroy a tiny spider? The effort probably did not match the enemy. Fear can make us overreact to perceived threats around us. If others will not share our fear, it is easy to go on the attack—turn our backs on them, demonize them, maybe even physically harm them or hope for something bad to happen to them.

The apostle Peter urges a different approach in the Spirit-inspired words of today's text. He calls on us to seek unity, to be sympathetic, to love others like they are members of your family, to have compassion, to be humble. *"Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling,"* he writes, *"but on the contrary, bless."* Your neighbor is not your enemy. You are not called to fight him but to love him.

This of course is not easy. When we have been wronged, we don't want to let someone off too easily. If we do, we are afraid that we will be wronged again. Or if we try to build bridges and make amends, we are afraid that our attempts will be rejected and our kindness thrown back in our face. But what we are afraid of more than anything is looking weak, taking the humble path, swallowing our pride, submitting to one another. This is difficult and even painful. Why should we have to do this?

We show love to our neighbors because it is right. It is the will of God, and His will is perfect. We are to *"love our neighbors as ourselves"* (Lev. 19:18). God has the authority to demand this of us because He is the only God. His First Commandment says, *"You shall have no other gods."* This means that *"we should fear, love, and trust in God above all things"* (Luther's explanation).

But what exactly does it mean to fear God? It means to fear His punishment if we sin against Him. This fear causes us to do one of two things. The first is to try to hide from Him like Adam and Eve tried to do. But as they learned, there is no way to hide from God. Peter attempted something like this when Jesus gave him and the other fishermen the great catch of fish. Seeing what had happened, *"he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord'"* (Luk. 5:8). Peter's sin made him want to escape the Lord's presence.

But the better way to deal with the fear of God's punishment is to repent of our sins, to kneel before Him and put ourselves in His mercy. We might be able to hide our sins from others, but we cannot hide them from God. He already knows them, and He will have justice. He does not play games. The author of Hebrews writes that *"[i]t is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God"* (10:31). It would be terrifying to stand before Him without repentance and faith. Then all our sins would be brought up against us and held against us.

This is why He wants us to repent, repent of our lack of trust in Him, repent of our lack of love toward our neighbor, repent of our fearing so many things around us, but hardly fearing Him. And what does He do when we lay our hearts and minds open before Him? By admitting our wrongs, don't we acknowledge that He has the right to punish us?

He does have that right, but He does not send His wrath upon the repentant. He gives His grace. Look how the Lord dealt with Peter. Peter had just admitted his sinfulness. He was terrified to be in the presence of the holy God and begged Jesus to leave. And the next words out of Jesus' mouth were, *"Do not be afraid"* (Luk. 5:10).

This is how the Lord deals with each one of us. We have sinned against Him in so many ways, and He knows it! But His response is not to take revenge. It is not to demonize us or seek to harm us. His response is forgiveness. Jesus tells us, *"Do not be afraid."* *"Do not be afraid of God's wrath anymore because I took that righteous punishment for you. Do not be afraid that your Father in heaven will turn His back on you because He turned His back on Me instead. Do not be afraid of suffering in hell for your sins because I suffered hell for your sins."*

Because of what Jesus did, you are reconciled to God. He is not your enemy. He loves you. He seeks your good. Quoting Psalm 34, Peter writes that *"the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayer."* God considers you righteous because you trust in His holy Son. His ears are wide open to you. He wants to hear your fears. He wants you to turn them over to Him—fears about your relationships, fears about your finances, fears about the future, fears about your health and life.

The Lord promises that He will not abandon you to these fears. He will not leave you even if the whole world turns against you. *"Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?"* asks Peter. *"But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled."* You are blessed in your suffering because the Lord is with you, and no evil can prevail against Him. The victory is already His over sin and death, world and devil. And that victory is yours by faith in your Savior Jesus.

You and I cannot control what may happen to us today or tomorrow or the next day. That can make us feel afraid; we like to be in control. But it is far better to put our trust in the Lord, to leave our lives in His control. He loves us with an unchanging love. He redeemed our lives by shedding His own precious blood. He graciously called us to faith so that we would become heirs of eternal life and salvation.

"Fear itself," as President Roosevelt put it, is not the problem as much as what we fear. Our fear should be directed to the Lord alone. He is completely holy and just. He is all-powerful and

knows all. He can end the troubles we face in a moment, or He can use them to shape us and to call us and those around us to repentance.

Whatever He does, we know that He does it out of love. Through Jesus our Savior, we do not need to fear His wrath or eternal punishment. The fear that makes us want to run and hide is replaced by the fear that loves Him, respects Him, and wants to “serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness” (Second Article explanation).

So we look to Him in this godly fear, entrusting our lives and our troubles and our futures to Him. And He looks upon us with grace as His own dear children and says, *“fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand”* (Isa. 41:10).

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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