

Of Fear and Love

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Reading: 1 John 4: 16-21

So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as God is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because God first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from [Christ] is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

“Onward Christian Soldiers, marching as to war” goes the old hymn. It is a hymn that I have always loved, God help me- even after getting clear about being a pacifist. *Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war...* our history as people of faith is full of battles between good and evil, righteousness and sin, light and darkness. Cosmic battles.

We *are* caught up in struggles bigger than we are. Faith has some marching involved. And yet despite loving that old song, truly I say to you, too often we have confused our faith struggles with the wars a misguided world chooses for us. So let us confess we have oft embraced an attitude of *God on our side*, and sacrificed the essence of our faith. We who follow Jesus know that might does not make right. And our scripture passage today reminds us that while we are called to a pilgrimage that brings conflict, ours is a different path than easy righteousness, or satisfied truth.

The first Epistle of John transforms our understanding of what the basic struggle is: it is a struggle for our humanity itself. In our usual way of thinking, we arrange the worlds in opposites—and there is some truth in this. The opposite of right is wrong, love/hate, life/death.... The opposite of fear is courage, the opposite of love, hate—or is it?

What if the opposite of love is not hate, but fear? And what if the antidote to that fear is nothing but love? Catholic theologian and Jesuit Priest John J. McNeill, an openly gay man, was thrown out of his order and effectively silenced by the church in which he was rooted. He once came to preach at a church I served as pastor.

McNeill read to us from John's epistle. He proposed gently and without malice that the real struggle we are all engaged in is the struggle of Love and Fear. Huh? Perfect love casts out fear. The root reality that drives hate and war and bigotry is ... fear. Test this idea with your own experience! The solution to unjust systems, suspicion, rejection, aggression, suggested the quiet priest, is not one side winning over the other, but Love, love prevailing over fear. “There is no fear in love....”

Of all people, John Lennon came to the same conclusion: “There are two basic motivating forces: fear and love. When we are afraid, we pull back from life. When we are in love, we open to all that life has to offer with passion, excitement, and acceptance....” Thus spake John Lennon. Until we learn to open ourselves in love to our neighbors, friends and enemies alike, we will not have what it takes to address the fear that infects our world.

I have been the pastor of churches that are open, welcoming and affirming across the more than twenty years. I have been humbled and touched by many who have found their voices, learned to love themselves, struggled to live their love honestly, rather than be silent or lie.

I haven’t had to experience the kind of pain that some of you have, in terms of relationships broken or hatred and bitterness received. I do know what it is like to be told in the sweetest tones: “Pastor, I am really concerned for you,” and then in the same tone informed that I am going to a special hell reserved for false teachers. But such moments have been far outweighed by witnessing grace and healing again and again.

One such short moment—an unknown woman’s voice on the phone, in the summer of 2009. She was calling the church she once belonged to in North Carolina, a church she and her family had left in anger and anguish several years earlier, when the church took a public stand that it was ready to license a gay man as a minister. Now she was calling back- long distance. She sounded a little shaky. She acknowledged to me where she had been then, and then admitted she had come some distance in the years since. Now she was calling because her niece had recently come out as a lesbian. And she needed to ask for help in finding the resources to understand and support this woman she loved.

Hearts can change. Those who are bitterest enemies can be transformed by love: by a relationship that means the world to us. Repentance can be a phone call to the church we have left; a hand extended in love to a relative. *Perfect love casts out fear.* And yet it does not do so all at once. There are no short cuts—it happens soul by soul, heart by heart. All of us have a role to play. And all of us need to receive love as much as, or more than, we have love to give.

We will continue to march, not as soldiers unto war but as followers of Christ, pilgrims in the path of unrelenting love. It is not about not throwing out people, not dismissing our critics or even those who see themselves as righteous foes—but rather casting out fear, casting it out from our own hearts and inviting our neighbors to do likewise with prayer, with honesty and mercy, and most of all, with the sheer power of unfiltered divine love.

This is the onward path to which the crucified one invites us. For this holy Love Affair we dare to bear the name of Christ.