

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Power of Love in a Crisis
March 15, 2020
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Mark 4: 35-41

In seminary they taught us a sermon writing schedule that took four days. Monday read and reflect. Tuesday research. Wednesday begin writing. Thursday finish and polish. Since seminary I have followed that structure once...this week. But then Governor Whitmer gave a press conference about the Covid-19 virus and the response she wanted Michigan to take. And then University of Michigan and Michigan State University moved all classes online and told students to go home. And then local schools closed for two weeks. Our world changed, and the message I had for once in my life not procrastinated to write did not make much sense. I had to start all over on Thursday.

We got into a boat on Monday, thinking it would be a normal trip across the week, and now we find ourselves in the middle of a wind storm. The past few days for me have felt like someone is slowly turning up the dial of my anxiety. I wake up optimistic and refreshed, but as the day goes on a tightness begins to grow in my chest. I flip flop between thinking “this is all an overreaction” and “We need to act swiftly and completely.” One article tells me the situation is going to be worse than we can imagine and then the TV tells me we have everything under control. The speed and intensity of the competing claims makes me feel like I have emotional whiplash. I’ve gone to bed at night exhausted and unsure and frankly afraid.

The disciples in our second lesson today are in a panic too. Their boat trip has turned into a nightmare. The Sea of Galilee is well known for its sudden and terrifying storms. The writer here did not need to give much detail for the audience to understand the kind of danger the disciples were in. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. Metaphorically this sounds very similar to our week.

Fear takes hold of the disciples as they all respond in their own way. Some grab ropes and begin to help the crew, some take the ropes and tie themselves to the boat, some assess if they think they can swim to shore. At least this is how I imagine their reactions would be. In this chaos, someone spots Jesus at the back of the boat...asleep. In great fear they rush and fiercely shake Jesus awake screaming “aren’t you afraid we are all going to die!?” Jesus calmly sits up, looks at the wind, then the water, then the disciples. To the wind he motions to be quiet, to the water he whispers “peace,” and to the disciples he asks “what are you afraid of.”

Jesus always asks the best questions. He does not say “do not be afraid” he knows their fear is based in a powerful reality. Jesus does not think fear itself is the problem. It’s okay to be afraid. What Jesus is asking them to do is pin point where their fear is located. That’s what Jesus does when he wakes up. The wind was too loud and he told us to shush. The sea was a bit wild so he told it to be still. Jesus identified where his fear was located and found what was in his control to manage and took action. Because Jesus does this so quickly, he doesn’t even look like he is afraid and the disciples are in awe of his calm presence.

Jesus wants the disciples to be able to respond this way too. The first step is to identify what they are afraid of. If they are afraid the boat will capsize then the next time they get into a boat they need to assess if they think

the boat will stand a storm, and if they trust the captain to make good choices. I would venture that Jesus made these assessments before he got on the boat because he was resting really well. He must have been confident in the boat's soundness and the captain's ability. If the disciples can identify concretely what they are afraid of then they can find if there is anything they can control to lessen or eliminate their fear.

Fear is the signal that something needs to be changed. Jesus knows fear is helpful, so he does not reprimand them for feeling fearful. But he also knows sitting with that fear in the chaos and panic is not helpful. He wants them to find a way to take action. Action is the vaccine to fear. Jesus wants them to name their fear specifically then find a way to improve the situation. Jesus then asks them if they have any faith. I always get a little offended when Jesus asks the disciples this question, because I think "these are your guys Jesus!" They have left everything to follow you, how can you keep calling them out on their faith. What this question does though, even with its slight offense, is to make the disciples answer unequivocally, "we do have faith!" Which then makes them realize they forgot to engage that part of themselves in the crisis.

It's hard to remember to engage our faith because the net around us gunked up. Remember how I said I have been waking up optimistic and then throughout the day I get more and more weighed down by the news and decisions and interactions. That's my net getting gunked up. At the end of each day I have so much information and feelings to sort through I'm overwhelmed and can't think straight. By morning I'm rested and can logically think about what I experienced the day before. My net is refreshed.

We all walk around with a net around us. You can imagine a net right, a string like rectangle with other strings tied vertically and then some connecting them tied horizontally. This net lets some things pass through, and collects other things. When we have a moment to reflect and reel in the net we can assess what has been caught and throw some things back and keep the more desirable moments as memories. This net we walk around with everyday collects the things we see and hear. It can collect the feelings of others and captures ideas we interact with. At any point in the day we can assess what is caught in our net. We might find a dark and negative interaction which is not so great to carry around. We can look to see if there is anything we can learn from it. If there is we keep that piece and unburden ourselves from the rest. We also might find a lovely story that we want to keep all of for a little while to encourage us and make us smile. Every day we pick through our experiences and process what we have been through.

In times of crisis though we lose our understanding of what to keep and what to toss. When we get a chance to reel in our net we think "This person said it's no big deal but if they are wrong I should keep this information." Did you hear the hook? IF.....if is a hook that is very hard to untangle from our nets. "If" hooks in unnecessary information and weighs us down. Our nets become cluttered with information and it becomes harder and harder to identify the stuff we can toss and the stuff we should keep. The weight of living with these gunked up nets can cause all sorts of personal and social atrocities. We have seen this already happen. When news about the corona virus began to spread Chinese restaurants saw a sharp decrease in guests because people thought "Chinese food" was the problem. This came from hearing reports that said the virus may have started in food in China and the public made the assumption that all Chinese food was dangerous. The fear of the new virus gunked up our nets and we could not tap into a reasonable response and so fearfully some avoided Chinese restaurants. That fear quickly became fear of anyone of Chinese descent, and racism against that population is growing. Even though new information is out there this old gunk is still caught in some people's nets. This is why it is so important to pay attention to how much you are carrying around and what you are allowing to stay caught in your net. We can't always avoid wrong information, we might not even know the

information is wrong till later, but when we consistently clean out the gunk we give the truth a chance. We may need others to help us sort through the information we have collected. To talk through the different reports.

I have been on a number of Facebook feeds and group texts listening to others and asking questions. It stings a little when something I thought was right is actually outdated or a bad piece of information. It is hard to not become cynical and defend my comment, but in the end I am not a doctor or a virologist and I need to stay open to hear the changing information. I need to clean out the old gunk that is in my net to make room for more useful information. This will help me lessen my fear and stay the person God is asking me to be. Fear is not going to help me be the blessing I need to be in this world. I think we are all walking around with very heavy nets this week. "If" hooks have gotten tangled in deep and we need to begin the process of detaching the excessive information. That process begins with asking "what are you afraid of" and "do you have faith."

Before my trip to Kenya last month I had some fears. I knew I was very excited but I was also a little afraid. I have a lot of experience with anxiety and fear, so I cleared some time, sat down and reflected on where the fear was coming from. I realized my fear was more about my parents and my cat. I was afraid my parents would be left with my student loans if the worst happened and I was afraid my cat would be sad since I would be gone for two weeks. Once I realized this I knew what I could do. I looked into my life insurance, took out some travel insurance, and bought a camera that spits out treats I could log into from abroad and see my cat. My fear disappeared. I asked myself what I was afraid of and found things I could control to dissipate that fear. I do this a lot because I also know what I have faith in. God has gifted me with a really good gut instinct. It has saved me from a few very scary situations. The problem is my gut and my anxiety feel very similar sometimes. So I have learned I need to stop and assess if the strong feeling I am having is my fear or my faith.

It's hard to remember our faith in a crisis. It is hard to calmly wake Jesus up and ask for assistance. We usually end up acting like the disciples and screaming "Where are you!" what are you doing! Sleeping!?" But there is so much power in our faith. That is the thing Jesus wants the disciples to realize they had control over. They wasted too much time sitting in their fear when all they had to do was wake Jesus up. If they had faith that he was who he said he was they would have known he could quiet the wind and calm the water. The thing the disciples could do, the action they could have taken before resorting to fear, was to engage their faith and get Jesus involved.

We need to ask ourselves what we are afraid of. Once that is identified I think we will be pleased by the variety of options we have to take action against the fears that have been stirred up this week. Some of those actions will feel like we are doing nothing. Working from home, watching worship from the comfort of your couch, but for this moment in these circumstances those are courageous actions to take. Jesus is asking us "what are you afraid of" so that we can hone in on the action we can take. If you are afraid of getting sick there are bullet pointed lists all over the internet how best to prevent getting sick. Washing hands, wiping surfaces around you, keeping social distance, not touching your face, staying home if you are in an at-risk population. There are things you can stock up on just in case you do get sick. Cough medicine, fever reducers, vix, soup, Kleenex. If you are afraid of a loved one getting sick you can buy these items for them, call them more often, encourage others to stay home. If you are afraid your favorite small business will not make it through an economic downturn call your representative and encourage them to enact some safety measures, buy a gift card from the company and use it later. If you are afraid students in Pontiac will go hungry if they aren't getting free lunches, oh boy do I have an action item for you! We are starting an emergency food pantry in partnership with

First Presbyterian in Pontiac. We have bags with grocery lists on them for you to fill and return to the church. You can also order from our amazon wish list if you are self-quarantining at home.

Fear tells us we have no control, that there is nothing we can do but in fact we have a lot of control in this storm. But if we just sit in our fear never identifying what the source is we will feel out of control. Our net will weigh us down until we don't even have the energy to take action. What are you afraid of? And what do you have faith in. The most powerful action item we have available to us is our faith. The most impactful thing we can do in this crisis is produce love not fear.

1 John 4 verses 17-19 say (The Message Translation) 'God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and matures in us, so that we are free of worry on Judgment Day—our standing in the world is identical with Christ's. There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—fear is in one not yet fully formed in love. We, though, we are going to love—love and be loved. First we were loved, now we love.'

Love is the power we wield in any crisis. When Jesus wakes up in the middle of a terrifying storm and calmly cares for the people around him the disciples are in awe. They have no idea where we got this strength. They ask themselves who is this guy!? How is he not freaking out? Jesus has faith in God and in his power, a power that we have access to as well. We have the power to push out the fear. The fear in us and the fear in the world. That power is rooted in our love. Our love listens, our love takes action against fear. That love needs a free path into the world. A gunked up net will act more like a shield around us. Sure it may keep hurtful information from getting in but it will also prevent our love from getting out.

Take care of your net in the weeks to come. Help those around you who show signs of a gunked up net, who are fearful, clear their nets too. Care for the people around you calmly and courageously. Social distancing does not mean isolation. Call friends and family more often. Ask those who need to self-quarantine if they need any help. In these ways love will cast out fear and our standing in this storm will be identical to Christ's.