

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Matthew 10:24-39

²⁴ *"The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. ²⁵ It is enough for students to be like their teachers, and servants like their masters. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!*

²⁶ *"So do not be afraid of them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. ²⁷ What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. ²⁸ Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. ³⁰ And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.*

³² *"Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. ³³ But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.*

³⁴ *"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to turn*

"a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—

³⁶ *a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.' ³⁷ "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸ Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.*

This week, many of us have been following the tragic story of the submersible that took five people down into the depths of the ocean to see the wreckage of the Titanic. We waited as we learned the contact was lost with the mini-sub; and as the days passed, knowing that the oxygen supply was growing grim. Perhaps you read or listened to every report the media had to offer.

I was not lone of those people who could do that. I would read the headlines, maybe the first sentence or two of an article, if the headline did not reveal that more of the article would be descriptive of what the passengers may have been going through. I didn't need to know that kind of thing, my imagination already was trying to fill in those blanks. My imagination was stirring my fear of going through underwater tunnels and making me feel uncomfortable.

Yes, I not only have a fear of snakes, but also, I have a fear of going through underwater tunnels, and I would never think of getting into a submarine. I can go through tunnels that go through mountains without any anxiety, but underwater, that really stirs anxiety in me. The thought of water rushing in and trapping me in the car just horrifies me. Don will plan routes that go around those tunnels unless he cannot find a feasible route. Sometimes what makes planning routes interesting for us is that Don has a fear of heights. He struggles with going over high bridges like the Chesapeake Bay Bridge.

So, even though this week's event did not involve me personally, it stirred up my fear enough to make me feel uncomfortable. As we now know the submersible did implode and all the adventurers were lost, hopefully without suffering.

Fear is a very uncomfortable and sometimes a debilitating emotion for us to deal with. The words, "fear not" or variations of the phrase are stated 365 times in the Bible, depending on the translation of the Bible you are reading. In an article written by Blair Parke, "What Does the Bible Say about Fear?", we read, "Fear can take on multiple personalities, be in different areas of our livelihood, and cause us to accept certain behaviors or beliefs without realizing we are doing it. Fear is an "unpleasant" emotion or anxious concern formed from our anticipation or awareness of danger. There is also another viewpoint of fear attributed to God that many may not associate as fear, and it is a fear of God that is inspired by reverence or awe of Him, His power, and His love."

In the text that was read for us this morning, we hear Jesus say, "Be not afraid." This text is a continuation of the text we looked at last week where Jesus was preparing his disciples to be sent out to be an extension of his ministry. Jesus recognizes that fear will cause the failure of discipleship. He was upfront with them, naming the hardships and rejection they would face as they challenged the norms of religious and social thought and practices. Naming aloud the suffering to be endured and its causes is the first step in freeing them from the tenacious grip of fear.

Jesus redirects their fear towards God in verse 28. In the *Message* translation of the Bible written by Eugene Petersen, verse 28 says, "Don't be bluffed into silence by the threats of bullies. There's nothing they can do to your soul, your core being. Save your fear for God, who holds your entire life – body and soul – in his hands."

For the believer, the fear of God is something much different than the way fear is usually thought of. The believer's fear is reverence of God. Hebrews 12:28-29 is a good description of this: "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire.'"

This reminds us that God is about the business of building a better life for us than what the world has to offer, and for this we should offer reverence and awe to God. What is reverence? It is our inner sense of who God is, with all the respect that will influence and shape our behavior. This reverence is the motivating factor for us to surrender ourselves along with our unhealthy, debilitating fear, to God.

Verse 29 in Hebrews 12, says that God is a Consuming Fire, creating for some the image of a vengeful God, ready to pour out His wrath on the less than perfect. Yes, God is like a great raging fire, which reminds us that he cannot be contained or manipulated to be used to do our own bidding, but God is not "out to get us". We are his beloved creation. His wrath comes on that which is worthless and sinful, that which tries to separate us from Him and his great love, those things that tell us lies about God to lead us astray.

We have no reason to be afraid of God. God is love; and what's not to like about love? We have God's promise that nothing can separate us from His love. We are reminded of this in Romans 8:38-39 where it says, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Yes, we may pull away from God and grab for things that might bring immediate and physical comfort, when things and circumstances around us rattle us and leave us shaking in our boots, but God promises to always be with us. We know that, and we cling to that promise when we have a healthy fear, a reverence and awe, understanding and relationship with God. Christians have a healthy fear of God and are drawn towards Him.

So, we find in this portion of scripture that Jesus names the hardships his disciples might face, and tells them that God is greater than these things, and God will guide them and give them perseverance, all the while being right there with them. He's saying, don't be afraid of these things and run the other direction, instead walk forward in obedience and with confidence in the fear of God.

As Christ's disciples we are given the same assurances. We too can walk forward into the mission we are called to do with confidence, rather than fear of what may happen. We have God on our side.

In this text, Jesus used himself as an example of the difficulties of faithful obedience to God's will and the hardships that attacked him. He knew what it was like to be ridiculed, harassed, abandoned and threatened as a result of his faithful obedience to God. The Pharisees accused Jesus of using Beelzebub's power to drive out demons. Beelzebub was known as the lord of flies and the prince of demons. Jesus, God's own Son was labeled evil. So, if Jesus, who is perfect, was called evil, his followers should expect that similar accusations will be directed at them.

We may not have people calling us evil, but they might tell us we are weird, crazy, ignorant; or people might laugh at us, avoid us, and disregard us. That doesn't make us feel good. This is where some people draw the line in their relationship with God, they shut down any efforts to reveal their faith because they are afraid of what might be said of them and what might happen if they do.

It is not easy to overcome the fears of suffering in some way, even though the cause is good, and it is for the sake of sharing God with others through word or deed. Jesus said that God is aware of everything that happens, even to sparrows, and you are far more valuable to God than they are. You are so valuable that God sent his only Son to die for you.

Because God places such a high value on you, you need never fear personal threats or difficult trials. These cannot shake God's love or dislodge God's Spirit from within you. It's God's Spirit that will help you overcome your fear and get you through any ridicule or divisions, even when friends and family are involved, that may result because of your faithfulness and commitment to God.

In the most recent *Messenger* magazine (that's a publication of the Church of the Brethren), there's several articles about EYN, the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria. They celebrated their 100th anniversary this year. The theme for their celebration was "EYN@100 - The Faithfulness of God". Here is a church suffering great persecution, unimaginable to us, and yet they have this incredibly positive theme. It says in the article, "It is easy to doubt God's faithfulness in times of hardship – and the people of EYN have certainly faced many horrific hardships – yet their faith in God remains strong. They know God is faithful, and they joyfully celebrate his faithfulness to them even while attacks continue. They were not afraid, and these celebrations showed that."

They did not celebrate in secret. The attendance at the celebration at the EYN headquarters in Kwarhi was estimated at up to 8,000, and attendance in Abuja was estimated to be up to 10,000. The EYN leaders had to put a limit on the number of people each district could send.

The faithfulness of God was emphasized, beginning with the first missionaries and continuing through the Nigerian church's present-day struggles. During the celebrations, the early missionaries were praised for the sacrifices and hardships they endured to bring the message of Jesus Christ to northeast Nigeria.

In one article it says, "Nigeria is a growing country with the largest population in Africa and the seventh largest population in the world. If its population growth continues, Nigeria is on track to become the third most populous country in the world by the middle of this century. As the population increases, so does the church. Today EYN is the largest Church of the Brethren denomination in the world," with nearly 1,000,000 members.

And that is despite the persecution and violence by Boko Haram, tens of thousands EYN members from Northeast Nigeria displaced by Boko Haram, have gone into the nearby countries of Niger, Cameroon and Togo and are establishing new Church of the Brethren congregations. They are not afraid to be disciples of Christ, and many of us might feel they would have good reason to be afraid, and even run the other way.

An article also says that "EYN continues to practice the traditional ordinances of the Church of the Brethren. EYN continues to model the Brethren peace stance, despite being targeted by persecution. They have chosen not to retaliate and even pray for those who have made their Christian witness sometimes a matter of life or death. The church in Nigeria is not perfect but it seems to be flourishing, even in the midst of suffering."

In an interview with EYN president, Joel S. Billi, he was asked if he has a message for the Church of the Brethren in the United States. After expressing gratitude for those who planted the church in Nigeria and for the church's continued union with the church in Nigeria, he said, "To the Brethren in the US, I say, let them keep the candle burning of Christ. The church in the US is shrinking, but that should not be allowed to happen. Let us hold each other and speak to each other in love, to build up one another. If we put off one another, that wouldn't be good. If you grow in the States as well, that will make our joy complete. We are expecting much from you."

Wow! What a challenge! What a hope! What incredible confidence in our ability to answer Christ's call, to be disciples filled with the fear of God, and unafraid of whatever it may be that stops us from faithfulness to God's call on our lives.

Fear can be a powerful paralyzing factor working to keep us silent and uninvolved in the work of Jesus. What are the fears that hold potential disciples back? Fear of those who are different from us, fear of those who think differently than us, challenging us to love them in spite of our differences and understanding of the Word, fear of losing friends and family who feel having faith in a God they cannot see, who is surrounded by a certain amount of mystery, who lets innocent people suffer, is foolishness, fear because we lack confidence in our abilities to do the work of Jesus.

We cannot allow fear to win. God will not allow it to happen. He is a consuming Fire that will wipe it out. We are called to be a part of this effort, wiping out evil, to build God's kingdom of peace and love. Jesus said, "Do not be afraid." May we listen as often as he says it to us, and be assured that God is with us wherever we go and whatever we do for his glory. Amen.