

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“No Fear in Love”
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Easter 5—April 29, 2018

Lessons: 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” When I served in the Church of Scotland, I worked alongside a wonderful if somewhat dour Scottish Presbyterian who surprised me when he told the following story at a wedding we led together. A young Scot in Glasgow was engaged to be married and he sent a wedding invitation to his uncle who lived in the Outer Hebrides. The uncle thought it too difficult and too expensive to make the trip to far away Glasgow so he decided instead to send a telegram to congratulate the bride and groom. He thought that our verse for today would be appropriate for a newly married couple: 1 John 4:18—*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.*

On arriving at the telegraph office, this good Scot discovered that it would be too expensive to send the full verse by telegram, so he opted instead to send only the chapter and verse, knowing that at any good Scottish wedding the best man would have his Bible with him. He asked the telegraph operator simply to send the verse heading: 1 John 4:18.

The telegram arrived on time and the best man stood to read it, however in sending the telegram, the operator dropped the number one, so that the telegram actually read only: John 4:18, as in the Gospel of John, chapter four verse eighteen, not the First Letter of John, so the best man stood and read from the gospel: “for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.” You can look it up for yourself.

Regardless of the fact that his original message did not come through, that Scottish uncle had wonderful words of advice for any one of us: *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.* Some of you may remember from Easter that the command that appears most often in Scripture over and over again is simply: Do not be afraid. In Deuteronomy when the people of Israel came to the Promised Land, God said: “Do not fear or be dismayed.” In Isaiah God proclaims through the Prophet: “Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.” When the shepherds were afraid, the angel said: “Fear not.” When the women went to the tomb and found it empty, the angel said: “Fear not.” Do not be afraid. The antidote to our fear is a deeper understanding of God’s love. That’s the love that can cast out fear.

Of course, we live in fearful times. We know all about fear. We are afraid of terrorists. We are afraid of random violence. We are afraid failure, of getting sick, of not having enough. We are afraid of being found out, discovered for who we really are. We have known about fear from our earliest times. John Buchanan writes about watching the History Channel’s *The Bible* where he saw the birth of Moses, the slaughter of Hebrew babies and the rescue of Moses from the river. He experienced “discomfort bordering on revulsion at the occasional exaggeration of the biblical narrative”¹ but he kept watching as Moses fled Egypt and later returned to lead the people out of Egypt, with the Red Sea parting in the nick of time and then flooding back down to drown Pharaoh’s pursuing army. Buchanan has trouble believing in a God who is portrayed as vengeful, angry and murderous, yet sometimes in our fear of others, we have relied on this image of God to sanction our own angry, vengeful and murderous tendencies. Years ago, I heard Father Henri Nouwen speak about getting out

¹ John M. Buchanan, *The History Channel’s violent God*, in *The Christian Century*, April 2, 2013. © 2013.

of the house of fear and getting into the house of the Lord. That continues to be our call today and any interpretation of Scripture which suggests that we have the right to slaughter others is a text that we need to question.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan who directs the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico (and writes a fine daily meditation online), offers a working hermeneutic for interpreting scripture. In regard to *any* text, Rohr proposes: “If you see God operating at a lesser level than the best person you know, then the text is not authentic revelation.” If God is love (as our passage today suggests), then no person could be more loving than God, Rohr says. “God is never less loving than the most loving person you know.”² Do not use your fear to dehumanize others, whoever they may be.

There is no fear in love but perfect love casts out fear. Mark DeVries, a Presbyterian elder and licensed psychologist in Grand Rapids wonders if it is also true that perfect fear casts out love. In reviewing Sasha Abramsky’s book, *Jumping at Shadows*, DeVries suggests ways that our faith is related to fear. “To the extent that faith is about excluding outsiders and making us feel safe within clearly defined boundaries, it is driven by the primal evolutionary fear in which paranoia protects the clan from the threat of the other. To the extent that faith is about opening the heart, trusting divine grace, and expanding boundaries, then perhaps it can be about facing and conquering fear. The task that faces followers of Jesus today is to decry the fear that enables demagoguery while remaining attuned to the ways in which our own hearts are filled with fear. In other words, the task is to stay vigilant toward the fear that casts out love while being open to the love that casts out fear.”³

The answer to our fear is to recognize that God is love. When we claim that love in our own lives, then maybe we can begin to let go of our fear of others and recognize that God loves them too. That’s a message our world needs to hear. My own experience in this congregation is an example for me. Before we moved to Delaware, I read about all the Presbyterian churches in greater Wilmington and to be honest when I read about Green Hill my reaction was that this was not the church for me. It seemed much more conservative than any church I have served or been a part of, and so I was ready simply to be involved in another congregation. It did not seem the place for me. I discovered that God had other plans. Two members of the church introduced themselves to me and invited me to preach here. That led to my putting my name in for consideration to be the interim pastor and now I’ve discovered people I honestly have come to love. I found people who care deeply about living faithful lives. It doesn’t matter that we don’t agree about everything—who does? What matters far more are all the ways that God’s love is practiced in this place. I like to think that together we all encourage each other to get out of the house of fear and get into the house of God. Maybe together we can remind and challenge each other that if we want to love God, then we also must love our sisters and brothers—every single one of them. There is no fear in love but perfect love casts out fear. Dear friends, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

Let us pray: O God, teach us to love one another with that passion which comes from your overflowing heart, so those around us will recognize us as sisters and brothers bound together by your love and not divided by our fear. Show us again how perfect love can cast out fear. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

² Ibid.

³ Mark E. DeVries, *The fear loop*, in *The Christian Century*, October 24, 2017 © 2017.