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Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Series: Love: the Cure for Indifference
When Fear Says Otherwise

1 John 4:7-21

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent into the world God's only Son so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent the Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in God and God in us, because we have been given of God's own Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent the Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 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 the Son 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 God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

I'm not a big fan of scary movies. Matt loves horror films, but I just have no stomach for them. I don't enjoy the critical stop, that moment where everything becomes still and silent and even though you know the monster or the psychopathic killer is about to spring from the shadows, you *still* jump six inches off your seat. Nope. Not for me. I have an active enough imagination, that I don't need to add to it. You see, I am a worrier. I mean a champion worrier. Worry is so funny because if you worry about something and it doesn't come to pass, your brain gets the message that *it worked*. A miracle. Thus, I know that the world continues to spin, comets don't crash through our atmosphere, and there are no volcanos in Indiana because I have successfully worried them away. Or at least, I wish that were true. Anyway, that's why I avoid horror movies. I don't need more to worry about.

The truth, of course, is that we are often afraid, whether we indulge in horror films or not. Fear makes money - not just in the movies, but in newspapers, cable tv, true crime

podcasts. We allow ourselves to be constantly bombarded with the worst of humanity. We're convinced that there are neighborhoods where we might be killed simply by driving there, gas stations where our children might be abducted simply by stopping there, people who threaten us simply by the way they look. We consume a steady diet of fear. We are afraid of one another. We are afraid of breaking the few frayed threads that are barely holding us - barely holding our society - together. We are afraid of falling apart. We are afraid we will say the wrong thing. We are afraid we will be found lacking. In the midst of all the reason we have to be afraid, God who is love gives us the courage to act when fear might say otherwise.

Let's talk about fear for a minute. On the one hand, biologically, fear keeps us safe. It helps us determine whether the best course of action is to fight or flee. But when we indulge our fear, when we dwell on it, when we feed it - well then, fear assumes that there is a little pot of wellbeing from which we are drawn and there isn't enough to go around. Fear assumes that if I don't make sure I have mine first, then you'll take it all. There's an old story, I'm sure you've heard it. It is an image of heaven and hell as two rooms across from one another. In one room, there is a giant pot of soup, and everyone has long handled spoons with which to eat. Everyone is hungry because their spoons are too long to get the soup into their mouths. In their fear and hunger that there will not be enough, the soup ends up everywhere but into the bellies it was made for. This is hell. Across the hall, the set up is the same - a pot of soup, long handled spoons, but, here, everyone is full and clean and tidy because they feed each other.

Thomas Merton once said that "Fear narrows the entrance to our hearts." As people of faith, we have to confess that fear is toxic to us. When we are afraid of one another, we lose the capacity to see other people completely, to hear their stories. When we are afraid, we limit our ability to love. But love does the opposite. It opens us up to action, giving us the courage to do what is right.

In First John, the Elder doesn't just talk about the fear we have of each other, but the fear we have of God. When we live in terror of God's judgement, the outcome is, actually, the same. When we are afraid that God is a harsh judge, then we make perfection rather than love our goal. We treat each other in one of two ways: we demand more and more from each other, setting impossible goals to which we will never measure up; or we assume that others are beyond our help. We grow indifferent to them. But when our expression of faith is fear of God's judgement, then we don't trust God as God was most fully revealed to us: on the cross. The cross is a statement of God's undying love for humanity. When Jesus could have responded to a fearful situation by doing everything to save himself, he instead gave his love to us. Love is the courage to act when fear might say otherwise.

This isn't to say, I think, that love stands in opposition to fear. No. I still firmly believe that the true opposite of love is indifference. In the face of fear, love is the only force that

can transform fear into something else. I think this poem by the poet and pastor Laura Martin is instructive. She writes:

*If you are angry, let your anger be fire
So it can warm someone chilly.
If you are grieving, let your grief be a river
So someone thirsty can drink.
If you are numb, let your numbness give you capacity
To walk in hard places and not feel hurt.
If you are broken, let your brokenness
Be what makes space for a new thing to enter.
If you are fearful, let your fear be a warning signal
That others may look up.
If you are lost, let your being lost
Make a new place and call it home.
However you are,
Keep going.
However you are,*

Keep going.

Love is the courage to act when fear might say otherwise. That, too, is the cross: the courage to act when fear might say otherwise. To love in this way is to refuse to be afraid of one another. It is to refuse to buy in to stories that reduce people to something less than humans or to believe they are only as they seem now. To love in this way is to question the stories we're told that tell us what to fear, what to run from, that stun us into silence.

Let me give you some examples from the newspaper. We have been told we should fear people experiencing homelessness, because where they camp, they leave needles behind. There is, perhaps, a piece of truth in this message. *Some* people experiencing homelessness struggle with addiction. But should this be cause for fear or courage? We have been told we should be afraid of this neighbor or that neighborhood because there is a high rate of crime, but a high rate of crime correlates with high rates of policing and not necessarily an increase in wrongdoing or violent crime. We have been told transgendered people should only use the bathroom that correlates with the sex assigned them at birth because transgendered women are men who prey on women, but when violence involves trans people, they are almost always the victims.

And, so beloved, because we are loved by God, let us love one another. Let us turn to one another not with fear in our hearts, but love. Let us question every message that says we should be afraid, that says we should feel threatened, that says we should reject our neighbor. Instead, let us turn toward our neighbor in love because God is love.

Amen.