

Matthew 5:13-16

Scared of the Dark-Rev. Kelley Becker

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Good morning!

What are you afraid of? What is it that when you see it or think about it, you feel your fight or flight instinct kick in...your heart-rate increases, your blood pressure shoots up, you are sweaty, and hyper alert.

What is it that scares you?

Spiders?

Snakes?

Rodents?

Public Speaking?

Death?

Clowns?

I don't know very many people who can honestly say they aren't afraid of anything. In fact, fear can be healthy. There are things we ought to be afraid of.

We ought to be afraid of a tornado headed toward our community. We ought to be afraid to step out onto a ledge high off the ground. We ought to be afraid to touch a hot stove. Fear, and our physiological response to fear, is supposed to keep us safe from things that could cause us harm. But what happens when we get tricked into being afraid when there isn't anything to fear?

In 1998 at a high school in Tennessee, a teacher complained of a pungent "gasoline-like" smell in her classroom. Soon after, she fell ill, reporting symptoms such as nausea, shortness of breath, dizziness and a headache. Almost immediately several students in her class started to experience similar symptoms and, before long, the rest of the school was stricken. The building was evacuated as fire fighters, ambulances and police arrived on the scene to tend to the sick. That evening the

local emergency room admitted 80 students and 19 staff members; 38 were hospitalized overnight.

But what was the mysterious toxic gas that sparked the outbreak? Several extensive investigations by government agencies found nothing. Blood tests showed no signs of any harmful compounds. Instead, according to Timothy Jones a local epidemiologist, the *fear* of being poisoned had spread, fueling the symptoms experienced by everyone inside.

A report in the New England Journal of Medicine attributed the outbreak to a phenomenon known as ‘mass psychogenic illness’, which occurs when the fear of infection spreads just as robustly as the disease itself. The students and staff had decided that, based on the behavior of those around them, there was a real threat they needed to be afraid of.

The ‘outbreak’ in Tennessee demonstrates that people can be scared – to the point of sickness – without there actually being any real threat present.

This story illustrates what researchers have known for a long time. Fear is taught. Without even realizing it, our parents, our siblings, our friends, and the world teach us to be afraid of situations, things, and other people. On the news, we see more pictures of ISIS extremists than we do of Muslims peacefully practicing their faith as part of our communities. So, we learn to fear our brothers and sisters.

What we forget is that the representation of Christianity is pretty darn scary too. The loud Christian voices are most often exclusive, anti LGBTQ, anti-Muslim, judgmental and full of condemnation. They scream believe the right things so you don’t go to hell. They present a picture of a God who favors the United States over other countries, and whose will is for financial prosperity to those who give generously to the church, rather than for wholeness for everyone. In short, they

paint a picture of a God I don't recognize. And if I believed what they said, that kind of God would scare me too.

This world needs less fear. Today's passage calls us to cultivate a spirit of fearlessness by suggesting two fundamental questions of life:

Who are we?

What are we to do?

It answers those questions with two metaphors, one about salt, one about light. And here is the truth, we cannot be salt and light and be afraid. We have to focus more on who we are and what we are called to do and less on the things we have been taught to fear.

In this passage, Jesus does not simply draw the comparison, as if the disciples are *like* salt and light. They *are* salt and light. And as a city cannot be hidden, neither can the disciples remain behind the scenes. They have to stand out, stand up and be counted. Their message, our message, is intended for the world to see.

The first metaphor, "You are the salt of the earth," suggests that we who follow Jesus, have the capacity to cause goodness. Like salt, which is used to alter or enhance the taste of food, followers of Jesus have the ability to alter or enhance this world through connections with all of creation, perhaps especially through our relationships with other people. The Beatitudes, which we focused on last week, give us clues about how we are to be and what being the salt of the earth could look like. This is certainly the traditional interpretation of what "salt of the earth" might have meant for the author of Matthew.

But, there is another interpretation that I think is more compelling. Dr. John Pilch, Professor of Theology at Georgetown University questions the traditional interpretation of this passage. His idea is that the best interpretation of any passage is the most culturally plausible. Based on

his study of the Greek word, translated as earth in the New Testament, he believes a better translation would be “earthen oven”. He writes, “In the first-century Mediterranean world, salt was used to start cooking fires. Palestinians placed flat plates of salt on the bottom of their earthen ovens to activate the fire. Salt had a catalytic-like effect on the fuel, which was dung, causing it to burn.” So, in this sense, salt brought light. “You are the salt of the earthen oven.” Being salt and being light go together in that our lives are to bring light to the world, to be beacons of hope and models of inspiration.

The danger for us, according to verse 13, is the loss of our salt-ness. After some years, the salt plates in the earthen oven underwent a chemical reaction due to the heat. The result was that the salt no longer facilitated the fire, but rather impeded and stifled the burning of the dung. It is in this sense that salt used for this purpose lost its salt-ness, that is, its ability to facilitate a fire.

This loss of salt-ness occurs when we forget who we are or maybe we are afraid of actually living in to who we are called to be. We are called to disrupt the status quo by welcoming people who have been kept on the outside, by caring for people who have suffered loss, by making justice happen, by practicing mercy, by having integrity, by being peacemakers, and by courageously standing for what we believe in. In short, we are the ones entrusted to continue the work Jesus and his disciples started and sometimes it’s scary.

It’s been more than 2000 years since Jesus’ birth and the empire is still oppressing people who are poor and sick. People who are viewed as different are still kept at arms’ length, detained at airports, separated from their families, or worse. Women and children are still vulnerable in many places all over the world and even in our own country. Followers of Jesus who do not engage in practices to transform the world, to elicit goodness, are like salt that has lost its taste and or its

ability to activate change. And if our faith doesn't affect how we respond to other people, especially when they are vulnerable, victims of injustice, and suffering, then what good is it?

When I was in search and call, I read many congregational profiles, just as the search committee here read many candidate profiles. I remember when I read the profile for this church. There were a couple of things that stood out to me. First, the financial information provided told a story. The part of the story I really, really liked was that this congregation chooses to contribute 10% of the budget to outreach. I know there have been times when money has been very, very tight. You could have chosen to turn inward, cutting the amount of money used for ministry beyond the bricks of the church. And that's what many churches have done. But, you didn't. You chose to continue to use those funds to help other people, to continue to disrupt the status quo in many respects. You didn't let fear keep you from responding to the needs of other people.

The other thing I loved about this church's profile was the emphasis on 3 core values...without looking at your bulletin, can you name them?

Hospitality

Justice/Service

Spiritual Growth

These are the ways this congregation sees itself causing good things to happen in the world. I've asked church leaders to consider these three values as they plan for this year. If these values really do define us, then everything we do ought to be able to be tied back to them. Watch for more on these values in the coming weeks.

The second metaphor in today's passage reminds Jesus' followers that they (we) are the light of the world and that this light should not be hidden, but seen. We often interpret this to mean that we are not to

hide our gifts and talents by placing them under the metaphorical basket. This is certainly a valid interpretation and we are called to be good stewards of all of our gifts. I would like us to think about this metaphor a little differently. The world needs light only because there is darkness.

We are called to bring light to a dark and broken world. Light draws people to its warmth and brightness. But in order for the light to be seen, we have to be willing to go to where the darkness exists, to engage it and walk through it, so that in time, the light can prevail. In her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, author Annie Dillard writes, "You do not have to sit outside in the dark. If, however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that darkness is necessary." We cannot be afraid of the dark. We have to go to the dark places.

Where are the dark places? First, darkness exists within ourselves. We don't like to admit it, but we all have a bit of darkness within us. I encourage you to look for it in yourself. Are you afraid of people who look different from you? Is that why you choose to donate money to social service organizations, rather than giving your time? Are you jealous of your neighbor, so much so that you avoid him or her? Do you worry so much about not having enough that you would do anything to get ahead? Where is the darkness in your soul? Look for it. Don't fear it.

When we confront our own darkness, it prepares us to confront the darkness in the world around us. When we confront, and conquer our own fear of "the other", we are better equipped to confront racism and discrimination in the world. When we cultivate contentment in the face of our own jealousy, our relationships change, we become cheerleaders for other human beings rather than competitors. When we practice giving sacrificially, we become more generous with our money, our time, our lives.

The work starts in our own hearts and spreads. And little by little, first a crack of light seeps into the darkness. And gradually, the light spills in, overcoming the darkness. I mentioned earlier that we have to cultivate a spirit of fearlessness within ourselves individually and within this congregation. We cannot both be salt and light and be afraid.

As your minister, I will try to be a courageous leader...I even have a tattoo on my wrist that says, "Be Brave with Your Life." One of the ways I hope we can "be brave with our lives" is by not being afraid to try new things. Sometimes the new things we try will fail spectacularly and sometimes they will be amazingly successful. Let's not be afraid to fail. I want us to be so focused on disrupting the status quo, so focused on being the voices of love, justice, and compassion, that failure doesn't seem so scary after all.

You see, there are people in Bartlesville who need the light that we are. They need to hear that God loves them just the way they are. We have to tell them that anytime human beings put up walls between them and other human beings, Jesus always stands on the side with "the other." And we need to show them that we are going to stand on that side too. We have to tell them that if they've been told they aren't enough, they have been lied to. And we need to show them that we aren't afraid of darkness. In fact, we exist because there is darkness.

We exist because there is darkness. Let that sink in. On Friday, after the celebration of life service for Willard Copeland, I was visiting with some of the charming and delightful women who put together the reception for his family and friends. I don't know exactly how we got on the subject, but we ended up joking about how helpful it would be to have a taller steeple with a light in it, like a lighthouse, or to have one of those great big spotlights that can be seen for miles. All tacky ideas, but the reality is we could have the brightest light we can imagine and it

wouldn't bring people to us. We have to take the light to them. And we are the light.

This week, let's be intentional...rather than running from the darkness, let's go to it. Seek it. I would love to know where you find it and how you share yourself when you find it. Be salt. Be light.
Amen.