

Homily – Do Not Be Afraid

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There is a scene in the original Willy Wonka movie that starts out as a sweet boat ride through a magical land and turns into an escalating scene of fear and loss of control. As the boat enters a dark tunnel the mood turns, and Willy Wonka, played by Gene Wilder, says the following poem about fear.

There's no earthly way of knowing which direction we are going. There's no knowing where we're rowing or which way the river is flowing. Is it raining? Is it snowing? Is a hurricane a blowing? Not a speck of light is showing so the danger must be growing. Are the fires of hell a glowing? Is the grizzly reaper mowing? Yes! The danger must be growing for the rowers keep on rowing. And they're certainly not showing any sign that they are slowing!

This is a poem of anxiety and fear which includes escalating loss of control, worst case scenario thinking, and total uncertainty. According to Brené Brown's book "Atlas of the Heart" anxiety is defined as an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes like increased blood pressure. Anxiety can be both a state and a trait. Some people feel anxious mainly in response to certain situations, while others can be naturally more predisposed to anxiety. Approximately one-third of U.S. adults will be affected by an anxiety disorder in their lifetime. Our anxiety often leads to one of two coping mechanisms - worry or avoidance. Unfortunately, neither of these coping strategies is very effective.

For anxiety and dread, the threat is in the future. For fear, the threat is now, in the present. Fear is a negative, short lasting, high alert emotion in response to a perceived threat, and like anxiety, it can be measured as a state or trait. Some people have a higher propensity to experience fear than others. What we fear is very personal and varies by individual. Some are afraid of rodents or snakes, others can't stand the inability to see their surroundings, and yet others are afraid of observing their children in peril. No matter how many lists there are about things we fear, most lists will include fear of social rejection. Curiously, we experience social pain and physical pain in the same part of our brains, and the potential exposure to either type of pain drives fear.

Throughout evolutionarily history, anxiety and fear have helped every species to be wary and to survive. Fear can signal us to act, or alternatively, to resist the impulse to act. It can help us to make wise, self-protective choices where we might otherwise sail mindlessly along, ignoring signs of trouble. Both our fear and our anxiety need to be understood and respected, perhaps even befriended. We need to pull up a chair and sit with them, understand why they're showing up, and ask ourselves

what there is to learn. Dismissing fear and anxiety is not useful to our spiritual quest for connection.

Our age has been called the age of anxiety, and I think that's probably a good description for this time. It seems like we no longer know where our foundations are. When we're not sure what is certain, when the world and our worldview keep being redefined every few months, we're going to be anxious. And, usually, we want to get rid of that anxiety as quickly as we can. I know I do. Yet, to be a good leader of anything today—a good pastor, manager, parent, or teacher—we have to be able to contain and hold patiently a certain degree of anxiety. Probably the higher the level of leadership someone has, the more anxiety they must be capable of holding. Leaders who cannot hold anxiety will never lead us anyplace new. One of my favorite definitions of a leader is one with a non-anxious presence. When leaders exude anxiety, that anxiety is contagious. However, when leaders manage their anxiety and fear, they lower the anxiety of the entire group.

That's probably why the Bible says "Do not be afraid" almost 150 times! We heard it at the beginning of today's Old Testament reading in which God says it to Abram. And, we heard it at the beginning of today's Gospel reading in which Jesus says it to his disciples and by extension he says it to us. Do not be afraid.

Now, let's be clear. Anxiety and fear are not bad in and of themselves. It is what we do with them that can be useful or destructive. If we cannot calmly hold a certain degree of anxiety, we will always look for somewhere to expel it. And, the most common way to expel anxiety is to throw it like darts at someone else, especially someone from whom we differ. Expelling what we can't embrace gives us an identity, but it's a negative identity. It's not life energy, it's death energy. Formulating what we are against gives us a very quick and clear sense of ourselves. Thus, most people fall for it. People more easily define themselves by what they are against, by whom they hate, by who else is wrong, instead of by what they believe in and whom they love. And, when fear moves us away from love that it dampens our spiritual journey and causes disorder in the world.

Now, I find it beautiful that in the face of fear and anxiety, God does not bid us toward courage. Instead, God draws us toward fear's essential sister, rest—a sister who is not meant to replace fear but to exist together in tension and harmony with it. For fear's origin is not evil, though evil certainly wields it against our souls daily. However, when we rest, even in the midst fear, we are embracing God's shalom, that peace of God that passes all understanding.

So as followers of Jesus what are we to do about fear? I found at least one good answer to this question from author and broadcaster Lisa Colón DeLay in which she recommends having a conversation with our fears as a part of our inner growth in

God. She writes, we don't have to hunt fear with a pitchfork. Fear has something to say. Our fears offer us an invitation to engage with the discomfort of the inner places. Will you give your fear a chance to speak to you?

DeLay says, when you realize that you are afraid or not doing well, sit down with your fear and have a conversation. And, here are three ways to converse with fear: First, when you feel or notice discomfort, pause. Stay paused until you know more.

Second, acknowledge what is happening in the moment. Be honest: "Ask yourself, What do I feel? Maybe it is fear, but maybe I'm also angry. What else is there? Maybe I feel overlooked."

Third, dig a bit deeper. Ask, what is this trying to show me? or what else might be going on? Give yourself some time, and delve into your fear: As you delve deeper you might start to understand why you feel angry. You might realize it wasn't such a good day. You might see that three things happened today that made you feel frustrated, inferior, and like you weren't being taken seriously.

Unexplored fear is a missed opportunity to take responsibility for ourselves. Instead, let's encounter the fear or the discomfort with some questions and curiosity. And then, once we've noticed something new, we move on. Do not be afraid. There are many things to fear, but do not let those fears separate you from God, others, and self. Instead reach through your fears, and move on and into God's embrace. You can do this. Perhaps you already are. So give yourself a hug as you live with fear and keep going.