

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“Rightly Placed Fear”**

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*“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. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid” (Mt. 10:28-31).*

Sometimes people believe that as Christians life should be easier: good health, prosperity, well-behaved kids and all that. But Jesus promises the opposite. In Matthew 10, Jesus is preparing his disciples for the opposition they will face. “Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake. All men will hate you because of me. Some will say you are of the devil.”

It's a good text for these days. The pandemic, and all its disruptions, is not going away anytime soon and is becoming ever more divisive. Racial turmoil, and the troubling responses to injustice among some protestors, is divisive too. Add to that the Supreme Court ruling this last week, and the continued pressures many Christians are already feeling to violate their consciences. For example, it's not enough to grieve police brutality. Now you must also protest and riot. If you don't, you're part systematic racism. It's not enough to legalize gay marriage. Now you must like it, approve of it, or be sued and labeled a hateful bigot. It's not enough to legalize abortion. Now you have to help pay for it.

Already in his era, Luther wrote, “They do not persecute us for being adulterers, robbers, or thieves. In fact, they can tolerate the most desperate scoundrels and criminals in their midst. But they are raising such a hue and cry because we refuse to approve of their teaching and life” (*What Luther Says, p. 1040*).

2020 has not been a good year. (Who knew the good ol' days were just three months ago!) And one senses it may get worse and more divisive. A natural response is fear. But Jesus taught us to anticipate trouble. Expect it. “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.” If they do these things to me, they will also fiercely oppose you.

Again, any normal person would feel fear. But Christians are not normal people. We listen to Jesus as He describes the difficulties we will face, but also as He calls us to live without fear. What is our source of courage? Jesus tells us. “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

I used to think this was in reference to the devil, but it's not. This is a reference to the Father. He's the only one capable of punishing a person, body and soul, in hell, so he's the only one we have legitimate reason to fear. However, in Christ, we learn that the Father loves us and means us no harm. Therefore, Jesus says, “Fear not.”

I'm thinking of my dad today. I was blessed with a really good dad. I knew he loved me and never meant to hurt me. I respected him, and his authority, but I did not fear him, because I didn't have to. It would have been misplaced fear.

Similarly, to fear the pandemic and the social turmoil and the suffering which is surely coming to every disciple and servant of Jesus: that's all misplaced. Expect such

things. Prepare for them. But do not fear them.

Instead, fear . . . and love and trust the Lord above all things. For he has power over all things. All will be held accountable to him. This includes those who do not fear or acknowledge him. They should, for to them he will one day be what Jeremiah calls a “dread warrior”. But for us, he is the One to whom we flee for protection. Notice the words our psalm calls him: our shelter, our refuge, our fortress, our shield and buckler. The psalm says everything it can to convince us to look to him for protection.

Jesus urges the same. “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So, do not be afraid.”

If a couple sparrows go missing from your neighborhood, you won’t notice their absence . . . but the Father will. Jesus uses the common and the small to teach a profound truth: in God’s eyes, no one is insignificant. Nothing happens to the children of a loving Father which falls outside his providential care. It neither takes him by surprise nor frustrates his purposes.

There’s no promise of immunity here. Sparrows will fall, but it won’t happen apart from the Father’s notice nor be outside his will. And if he cares for the sparrow, how much more must he care for you! Moreover, any God who cares enough to number the very hairs on your head cares also about all your sorrows, big and small, your fears, your suffering.

The early Christians loved this text. The Roman Empire declared them enemies of the state. Therefore, Christians were systematically hunted, arrested, hauled off to jail, or to the coliseums, or summarily executed along the roadside. Most of them were poor. In the face of Roman might, they must have felt so small, powerless and inconsequential. But again, if God cares for the sparrow, how much more so does he care for his people!

So, Paul writes, “Have no anxiety about anything” (Phil. 4:6). He wrote that, by the way, from a Roman prison, knowing his execution was near. Nevertheless, “Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.” Peter (also crucified by the Romans), wrote, “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:7). Luther, who also faced fierce opposition, wrote, “Cast your worries upon God’s back, for God has a strong neck and strong shoulders. He can easily carry the load.” (SL 12, 693 f).

See the common thread? Don’t misplace your fear. Don’t fear opposition or persecution. Fear, love and trust the Lord. Don’t even fear death. “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!”

Finally, be open to persecution; it’s not the worst thing in the world. Luther wrote, it’s “prosperity and good days we should fear. These may harm us more than persecution . . . For when the Gospel is not attacked, it rusts and has no opportunity to reveal its power” (WLS, p. 1039). Similarly, he also wrote, “When tyrants rage against the Gospel, they do no more than blow into the ashes. Then the fire becomes greater . . . Through persecution, Christendom grows; conversely, Christians become lazy and lax when conditions are peaceful and quiet” (*Ibid*, p, 1040).

So, good friends, don’t misplace your fears. Fear the Lord. Love and trust him, but don’t fear opposition or persecution. “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Rom. 8:28). Not in “some things”. Not “might work”. In all things God works for the good of those who love him. Amen.