

FEAR FACTOR ©**Matthew 10:24-39****June 22, 2014****Rev. Sharlyn Gates**

There are many reasons for us to fear. Some are really good reasons that are understandable, based on an experience or something that's happened that we are anxious about. Other fears seem to be there for no real reason. That was the case with this woman I read about:

She went to a psychiatrist, asking for help for her phobia. "I have this unreasonable fear that something is under my bed when I'm trying to go to sleep at night," she told the doctor.

"Well, that is unusual," said the doc, "but I think I can help you. It might take around 20 sessions, though."

"And how much do you charge for each session?" Asked the woman.

"\$80," replied the doctor. "But it's well worth the money to get over this fear."

The woman said she would call and set up some appointments, but the doctor didn't hear from her so he finally called and asked why she had never come back.

"My husband helped me get over my fear of something being under the bed ready to hurt me," she explained.

"Really? How did he manage that?" asked the doctor.

"When I told him how much the sessions with you would cost, he cut the legs off of my bed. That took care of the problem!"

An article I read this week talked about facing our fears head on. That by clearly looking at what we are afraid of, it often times ends up not seeming so big and scary. I saw a cartoon titled "Inviting my Fear to Tea." It was a small woman sitting on a couch with a large monster (as in "There's a Monster in My Closet"), a tea set on the coffee table in front of them and she is meekly asking, "More tea?"

And remember that TV show "Fear Factor" where they divide people up in teams and present them with extreme things to do – things that cause fear and trembling ... a test to see who can get through the challenge the fastest and best.

I honestly don't care to watch those shows. I think we have enough around us to fear with out creating more just for fun.

So what are some the things we fear today? Loss of health is often at the top of the list. My step-dad used to say, "If you've got your health, you've got just about everything." I never really appreciated that until I've gotten older.

Other fears that can overwhelm us is a fear of a financial fall – losing a job, or our life savings; losing the ability to pay for a home or the necessities to live; fearing not having enough money for retirement.

There is probably no greater fear than being at the side of a loved one – fearing they will die; having a fear of not being with that person, of being alone.

Many of us fear change; we fear conflict; the list goes on.

We've seen in the news recently reasons why people fear – Iraq at war within itself and how will we respond? Executions happening there – because of faith differences. Christian girls kidnapped in Nigeria. What fear they and their families must be experiencing. And thousands of immigrant children – many who are unaccompanied by adults, fleeing over our border in Texas to be free of gang violence and other threats.

If you've seen any news or read any of the main big newspapers then you know about decisions – tough decisions – that were made at our General Assembly this past week. They were decisions that are cause for great joy and celebration for many who have longed for more inclusion and who have been waiting to be affirmed by the church in their relationships that are not traditional.

Our GA, by a majority vote, decided that pastors in the PC(USA) can marry same sex couples, and congregations can approve those weddings within the church – if it is legal in that state and if the pastor and congregation are of the belief that they should. They do not have to, but they can.

There were other difficult decisions made this past week and I will inform you of all of them as the next few weeks unfold.

But, for this issue regarding marriage, there are many who are rejoicing and there are many who are grieving, who are confused, who are angry. And there are many who have fears.

I had the great joy of seeing a couple of my good friends last Saturday for the opening of General Assembly. Both of them are women who are Presbytery Executives. Susan – who serves the presbytery I came here from talked about the first congregation that would surely leave our denomination if this vote was positive.

Erin – who serves a presbytery in Pennsylvania - was quite fearful. They already had lost 8 congregations and she knew there were others waiting to see what would happen.

As a pastor I find myself feeling somewhat fearful. I hope this decision will not cause a division within our church family here and I hope it doesn't in our presbytery either. As a pastor I find myself seeming to be on the fence a little. I have a number of friends who are gay, whom I love and have hurt for because they have been shut out of so many of the joys and rights that the rest of us take for granted. They have struggled with who they are, with the hatefulness that comes from others – yes, even the church. I have to rejoice with them because I know them and know their honesty and their worth and value.

I know what the Scripture says but I also know other places where we have decided that what the Bible says is a cultural thing – like women being silent in church, covering their hair, not ever cutting their hair. For the most part, we have leaned on grace and forgiveness when it comes to divorce and remarriage, which the Bible says is a sin.

So, I've struggled with where we draw the line. How do we, the Church, pick and choose what is still meant today to be sin, to be wrong or what is cultural, written for a different time?

There are a couple of books that I think we who are interested in seeking God's will, ought to commit to read and discuss together. I'm thinking about how we might do that and hope you will participate in that with me.

But the other side of what I feel as a pastor is grief for the many people who are passionate about what they believe – so much so that they feel they cannot remain in a denomination that has such a different view. I feel pain for those congregations and presbyteries who have to decide to separate. I feel pain when I read things online that people have written – accusing those who believe a different way of not even being a Christian or loving God. I think that is going too far! The commissioners at General Assembly – this year and previous years – do not go and vote on these things lightly or without much study and prayer. There is a real sense of the power of the Holy Spirit present in that assembly.

Jesus tells his disciples what to expect as they follow him. They can expect slander and persecution and, quite possibly, even death. They can expect division within the family. He tells it like it is, giving them a clear picture of what is ahead – laying their fears out clearly so they can face them head on – invite their fears to tea.

Yes, Jesus was acquainted with conflict, with hatred, and certainly with death. As a pastor I lean on the central message of the gospel of Jesus Christ - grace and love and forgiveness. The good news is that God knows every hair on your head. (For some, that's not hard task). God knows every sparrow that falls. In other words, there is nothing that happens to us that God doesn't know about. We are in his loving care.

We are called to love God with all that we are. Jesus said that is the greatest commandment. And, he said, the second one is to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. That is our calling. There is no need to live in fear because God has us in the palm of his hand. And he has all those others right there too.

Yes, there are many reasons why we fear, but God has sent us His Son to show us that we have life with Him; we have power with Him; we can have trust in Him.

If God can use something as horrible as the cross to proof His love for us, then we can surely trust that, just as Paul says in Romans 8, "God is working all things together for good." And that "nothing can separate us from God's love."

Trusting in God, giving him our fears, let us turn to the Heidelberg Confession that you will find in your bulletin. This long time confession that has been used for many years by the church as a statement of faith is being worked on to be updated in its translation. Will you join me? I'll ask state the question and we can all say together the answer.

HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

Q. 1.

What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

A.

That I belong--body and soul, in life and in death--not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

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