

Peter M. Sensenig
Oxford Circle Mennonite Church
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Sermon Series: "Good News Bears"

"Living and Loving Without Fear"

This is the final sermon in our sermon series "Good News Bears." We've talked a lot about the Good News, the gospel, and what that means for us to be bearers of that good news. We've looked at the relationship between Jesus and the Church, if you remember the "Jesus Dance" where Jesus prays for all of his followers. Jesus' prayer for us is that the love of God and that Christ himself may be in us.

We saw how following Jesus brings us a new identity - Jesus called his disciples Peter and Andrew to become "fishers of people." Our identities are also changed when we follow Jesus. We had a sermon on joining the church, where we looked at the passage where the Ethiopian court official asks Philip, "What is to keep me from being baptized?" We saw how baptism is a covenant with God, but also with a body of believers. Our covenant here at Oxford Circle emphasizes following Jesus as we grow and are accountable to each other.

We looked at the mission of the church, which has two parts that must be held together. The first is preaching the gospel. Jesus sends out seventy-two disciples to proclaim that the "kingdom of God has come near to you." We too are called to be workers in the harvest. And the second part of the mission of the church is to show compassion. Pastor Lynn showed us how Esther is a wonderful example of compassion that God used to save her people. And last Sunday Brother Ron led us in seeing how those two ministries - evangelism and compassion - fit together to form the mission of the church, and because people need Jesus and a job, we're following God's leading and acquiring the new building.

At the center of all of this has been the good news. And in this the final sermon of the series I want to focus on what is at the center of the good news, which is love. I first called it "Contagious Love" to describe how it comes from God first then grows in us and spreads to those around us, witnessing in a chain reaction to the God who is the source of love. But as the sermon developed, I realized that the title I want to give it is "Living and Loving without Fear."

The main point that I want to make is that the love that's at the heart of the gospel is the opposite of fear. Verse 18 in our passage says that "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

But before we talk about living and loving without fear, I'd like us to think about: What is love? Now, there's a holiday that claims to be the holiday of love - what is it? Valentine's Day. But our passage in 1 John 4 sounds a lot more like two other holidays. Let's look at verse 9: "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him." What holiday does that sound like? Christmas. The next verse, 10, says "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." What holiday does that sound like? Easter. So next time Hallmark tries to tell you that Valentine's Day is the holiday of love, you'll know better. Now, I think that it's a good holiday - any day that helps us show love to each is fine by me.

But according to Scripture, the very definition of love is what we celebrate at Christmas and Easter. Let's look at our passage again: "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins."

So the first thing that we can say about love is that its very definition is this: God came in the flesh and out of his own self sacrifice redeemed us from sin. If you were to paint a picture of what love, that's what it would be. And any definition of love that doesn't fit with this one – sacrificial and redemptive love – is incomplete.

The second point is related to the first: love comes from God. Love has its origin in God. I want to use this water to represent God's love, and you could say that we are the jar, we are the vessel. God's love is poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. It's clear and pure. But we'll leave that for now and come back to that later.

The third important point is that the true test of whether God lives in us is whether we love each other. We are compelled to love just as God first loved us. John writes, "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (4:8). And in verse 11: "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. ¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit."

So here we have a three-part definition of love: Jesus Christ came in the flesh and redeemed us from sin by his own sacrifice, love comes from God, and if we really know the God of love, we will love each other. In the love that's at the heart of the gospel there is no room for fear. "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

Are you afraid of anything? Sometimes we can be fearful and not even be aware of it. Or sometimes we are very aware of our fear but we're not sure *why* we're afraid. Maybe some of us feel like Charlie Brown from the comic strip Peanuts. Lucy, another kid in his neighborhood, has a stand. At this stand she doesn't sell lemonade for five cents, like a normal kid. Lucy offers psychiatric help for five cents. So Charlie Brown goes and takes a little seat at the stand and tells Lucy that he's experiencing fear. And Lucy's trying to get at the root of his fear, figure out what his phobia is.

She asks him: Are you afraid of responsibility? If you are, then you have hypengyophobia.

Charlie Brown says: I don't think that's quite it.

Lucy: How about cats? If you're afraid of cats, you have ailurophasia.

Charlie Brown: Well, sort of, but I'm not sure.

Lucy: Are you afraid of staircases? If you are, then you have climacaphobia. Maybe you have thalassophobia. This is fear of the ocean, or gephyrobia, which is the fear of crossing bridges. Or maybe you have pantophobia. Do you think you have pantophobia?

Charlie Brown: What's pantophobia?

Lucy: The fear of everything.

And Charlie Brown says: THAT'S IT!

I hope that you don't have pantophobia, like Charlie Brown. I hope you don't fear everything. But each of us has fears. According to our passage in 1 John, this should serve as a reminder that God's love is not yet perfect in us.

Now, I don't think that all fear is sinful. In fact, we could probably say that Jesus was afraid when he was about to undergo torture and death and he was pleading in the Garden of Gethsemane for any other way to do God's will. The difference there was that Jesus in the garden was seeing more clearly than ever before.

But the kind of fear that we struggle with often clouds our vision. Fear makes us do things that we wouldn't do otherwise. Fear steals our joy and replaces it with bitterness and hatred. Fear makes us trade in our welcoming arms for weapons and arms. To turn around the Apostle's phrase, fear casts out perfect love.

There is no limit to the things that we can fear: failure, rejection, loss. But I'd like to focus on four things we tend to fear, and give examples of each. We fear judgment, which our passage says is the root of fear. We fear what we don't know. Third, we fear what is different. And finally, we fear what we're told we should fear.

Verse 17 says this: "Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world.¹⁸ 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." When we face the guilt of our evil deeds, our sin, it's no wonder we feel fear. God should judge us and condemn us forever. When we refuse to accept that God has totally forgiven our sins in Jesus Christ, we are trapped in the fear of judgment. We're forced instead to try to earn grace from God.

Jesus told a story about someone who thought he was earning God's grace. He was a Pharisee, a religious leader, a guy who everybody thought had an in with God and a foot in the door of heaven. And he goes to the temple, and there he sees a tax collector; the worst of the worst, totally beyond hope. And the Pharisee looks over and says, "Thank you God that I'm not a sinner like that guy. Because when judgment day comes, that guy's done." But the tax collector is distraught over his own guilt and says, "Lord, have mercy on me, I'm a sinner." And Jesus says it was the tax collector, not the Pharisee, who went home that day justified before God. The Pharisee thought he was a good enough person to escape the judgment he feared. And it so clouded his vision that he was unable to see the reality that God actually forgives sinners who repent.

When we live in fear of judgment from God, we're also unable to forgive other people. And Jesus says that this unwillingness to forgive others is actually what will be judged. It shows that we don't recognize how God has first forgiven us. The fact is, when we live in fear of judgment, our whole perspective is distorted and our vision is clouded.

I want to demonstrate what this is like by putting some red food coloring into this water. Remember that the water represents God's love that is poured out in our hearts. When we fear judgment, the clarity and purity of God's love is clouded.

So we've got one red fear swirling around in there, representing our fear of judgment. But we also tend to fear what we don't know. We fear the unknown because it is uncomfortable. I don't know if you can remember your first day of school. It can be a frightening experience for kids. I clearly remember my first day of kindergarten. For years I'd seen my older brothers go to school, and they came home every day, which means they'd survived. So it can't be that bad, I thought. Still, the power of the unknown had a grip on me. When the fateful day arrived, I decided that the only way I'd go was if I could wear my lucky yellow Disney shirt. So I did, and I survived. As a result, I decided to wear my lucky yellow Disney shirt every day. My mother disagreed with that tactic because of something she called "hygiene." After a prolonged standoff we finally reached a suitable compromise: I'd wear my lucky yellow Disney shirt every other day, and on the other days I'd just have to fend for myself against whatever misfortune awaited me. This arrangement worked until my lucky shirt disintegrated sometime in the middle of first grade.

But back to the point: just like a child fears the first day of school, we fear what we don't know. But we know that life, especially the life of faith, demands that we step out of our comfort zones. This is why our models of faith are Sarah and Abraham, who left their home country just because God told them to go. This is why we're buying a new building, even though it's not clear even now how everything is going to work out.

What is God calling you to do that might be unknown or scary? Might it be something like starting a new degree or a new job? Might it be taking a step in a relationship, like getting married? Might it be restoring an old or failing relationship, when you haven't talked in months or even years? Might it even be moving – across town, or even as an ambassador for Christ in another part of the world?

Don't let fear hold you back. If you do, fear will become like this food coloring, making God's calling and God's love in your life even murkier.

So now we've got two fears swirling around inside. And the third fear I want to talk about is the fear of what is different. Human history shows us clearly that it takes very little prompting for people to develop hatred and fear of what is different: different culture, different worldview, different skin tone.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, we pray that the church will be a community where those differences pale in comparison to the powerful unity we experience in Jesus Christ. In the church, our fear of otherness is replaced by the kind of welcome that we first received from God. Here God is creating one community of faith out of many trades and many shades.

But our fear can go beyond the household of faith. We might find ourselves fearing those of a different religion. I was greatly saddened in this recent election season to read and hear the strong language of fear that was readily used, especially about those of Islamic faith. The fact that Barack Obama is a Christian did little to prevent claims that his family background gives cause for fear. But even more troubling is the assumption that someone who is Muslim is not quite worthy of trust. Language that equates all Muslims with terrorists is inaccurate, unfair, and worst of all, unloving.

There are roughly 1.5 million Muslims in the world, which makes Islam second only to Christianity in numbers. Most Muslims live in Asia and Africa, but the number of Muslims in Europe and North America is growing. Even more importantly, the number of places where Muslims and Christians interact is increasing. If Muslims and Christians are neighbors, and Jesus told his followers to love their neighbors as they love themselves, then Jesus' command is getting more literal all the time.

According to the *Philadelphia Enquirer*, there are about 85,000 Muslims in Philadelphia alone. As of 2001, there were 33 mosques, Muslim houses of worship, in the city. If you haven't rubbed shoulders with folks of the Islamic faith here in Philadelphia, you will. This, my friends, is an opportunity like never before to let the love of God in you show itself.

Now I don't have this thing figured out by any means. But I wanted to give you an example from my recent experience. Earlier this fall I struck up a conversation with a shop keeper here in Philadelphia – let's call him Yusef. Yusef moved from the Middle East with his wife and four young children. After several conversations, I asked him about his faith. He told me that he's always been Muslim, and that he goes to a mosque here in the city. I told him that I was a pastor of a Christian church. He asked me if I was Catholic or Orthodox, the two kinds of Christian churches he knew, and I told him neither, I'm a Mennonite Christian.

Eventually I asked him if I could come along with him to the mosque, and he said sure. So I joined him on a Friday afternoon and we went to a good-size industrial building that had been newly converted into a beautiful mosque. I'd been to mosques before, but every experience is different. This mosque was a mix of many ethnicities and cultures. Everyone takes off their shoes, the men and the women sit in different rooms. Everyone prays when they first come in, then the imam, who's kind of like the pastor, gets up and delivers a sermon. It was all in Arabic, but I had a little translator device, so I could understand what was being said. In the sermon the imam encouraged the three or four hundred men there to continue the good things that they were doing for God, and not to stop, because they would be rewarded in the judgment day. They had an offering just like here, and then they had a time of corporate prayer, when they all lined up and prayed together. Afterwards some men stayed around and talked, and some just left.

In the following weeks I went back several times, and each time Yusef was there with his youngest son. He is devoted to following God and teaching his family to do the same. Over the same time we became more comfortable with each other and even had discussions about what it means to be a Christian and a Muslim. We talked about some of the amazing similarities, like the prophets, the concern for the poor, the judgment day, the importance of prayer and community. And we also talked about some of the huge differences, like the Christian faith in Jesus as God himself in the flesh.

My friends, I haven't convinced Yusef to become a follower of Jesus, and truthfully I don't expect he will. But I hope he will. The point of my story is not that there is a formula for telling people the good news of Jesus Christ. The point is that the way in which we do it, with an attitude of friendship and respect, is just as important as our goal. Hear the words from 1 Peter 3:15: "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

Sisters and brothers, when we fear what is different from us, we lose sight of the kind of love that comes from God and must be the reason for everything we do. Fear of what is different and whom is different clouds the love of God in us, just like this food coloring.

The final fear I'd like to mention is that we fear what we're told to fear. Again, this can be related to the other fears. Sometimes fear is created in us by what we hear and see. As an example of this, I'd like to use the present financial crisis. We hear everything from "Your lifestyle will have to change drastically" to "you'll lose your job and will not be able to find work" to "your retirement is slipping away and social security is headed for disaster."

Sometimes these legitimate concerns cause us to take actions we should plan for the future. But sometimes we are simply gripped by fear that robs us of our joy and our trust in our Creator. When we fear what we're told to fear, our vision is clouded even further.

The end result is a murky mixture of anxiety that leaves almost no memory of the perfect and pure love of God. But what does our passage in 1 John 4 say? "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

Now there's a reason why I run my ideas past my wife. Originally I thought that this illustration would be much more vivid and memorable if I cast out the contents of this jar into the congregation. Christy thought that was a bad idea, so instead I'll do a much more controlled cast, into this basin.

Remember, the original clear and pure love that has been clouded by all these fears is being cast out. And God, who is the limitless source of love that never dries up, pours out his pure and perfect love in our hearts again.

There is no fear in love. A life without fear is a powerful witness to the God who is love. Let's not let fear spoil the perfect love that God wants for us to have. We need not fear judgment, because God has forgiven our many sins in Jesus Christ. We need not fear the unknown, because God is there. We need not fear what is different, because in Jesus, God is creating one new community of faith. We need not fear what we're told to fear, because our God cares for us like the lilies and the sparrows.

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God" (1 John 4:7).

Prayer: Gracious God, we thank you that you are the source of all love, that in you we know what love is. We thank you for Jesus who came and lived among us and took away our sin by his own self-sacrifice. Help us to live without fear because you have given us a hope that will never fade away until your kingdom comes in its fullness. Give us courage to share the good news with gentleness and respect. And give us the strength to love each other as you have first loved us. Amen.