

Fear and Faith

Mark 4:35-41 *He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"*

Fear is part of our psychological, emotional, and spiritual makeup. We all experience fears of various sorts. How we respond to our fears shapes the way we live. If we are afraid of our fears, they tend to dominate us, making us withdrawn or defensive. If we find ways of facing and working compassionately with our fears, we can live with more peacefulness and creativity.

We live in a culture defined increasingly by fear. Fear of terrorist activity or avian flu. Fear that we will lose our social or economic status. Fear of those who practice a different religion. Our political leaders are very good at manipulating us by our fears so that we support self-serving and destructive policies.

Some dominant strains of Christianity have taught us to fear rather than trust ourselves. It goes something like this: We are born as hopeless sinners and we must always be on guard against this sinful self. God is a kind of distant overseer who is ready to punish us if we make a moral or doctrinal misstep. So we become divided within ourselves, filled with guilt and fear.

The story from Mark is very refreshing given this climate of fear that surrounds us. It is about fear and faith, which Jesus understands as opposites. The story is comforting because it affirms the reality that we do become afraid; we can identify with the disciples. When Jesus reprimands his disciples for their fearfulness and lack of faith, the assumption he makes is that they are fully capable of being fearless, but have not quite gotten there yet. This story was cherished by the early Christian community which was surrounded by religious and political persecution, as well as struggles within and among some of its communities. Overcoming fear was a very important spiritual work for the Christian community. It was the definition of faith.

The Sea of Galilee was known for sudden and violent squalls. The disciples are in a boat with Jesus going to the other side of the lake when a storm arises. Jesus is asleep in the stern of the boat. The disciples are terrified. Notice the contrast--Jesus who sleeps peacefully before and during the storm, and the disciples who

frantically wake him up. Jesus commands the storm to die down and says to them: "Why are you afraid? Do you not yet have any faith?" Why does fear still dominate you? Why are you still living out of your fear? You don't yet understand what faith really is, do you? It is the opposite of fear. It is peacefulness, trustfulness, not being so susceptible to anxiety.

Jesus didn't sit there in the boat gazing nervously at the sky. He knew the lake's reputation for storms that could come on you at any moment. Just like life! Anything can happen anytime. We know that. We can't control life. Yet we live with the persistent illusion that one day everything will be nailed down, will be the way we want it. It will never happen. We have a good day, things roll along, and it feels like clear sailing. Then someone hits us with a complaint or criticism, or we have a flat tire, or our leaders decide to start another war. Things never settle down and a big part of spiritual maturity is coming to grips with that reality. It's hard, I know. But life is ever-changing, and faith has to do with how we embrace this.

We can learn from Jesus to be peaceful while knowing full well that something can happen, good or bad, at any moment. We experience this when we are following God's call in a particular mission. There is the high moment of beginnings, when our spirits soar, filled with vision and high purpose. But then we get tripped up—others in the mission who don't agree with us on things, or some roadblock thrown in our path, or someone who simply thinks we are full of baloney. We wilt in fear and are ready to give up. But we deal with it as best we can and go forward again, feeling pretty good that we have learned something about trials and tribulations. Lo and behold, something even bigger falls apart or gets in the way, and down we go again, into the depths of fear and anxiousness. Or there's my own case. When things are going quite well, what do I do? I find myself conjuring up worry and fear about the future—Where's the money going to come from next year? Will we find people with the gifts and commitments we need to keep going? So even when the seas are calm, I make up my own storms!

The point is that there is something going on in Jesus that enables him to sleep before and during the storm, not trying to anticipate troubled seas and not panicking when they suddenly arise. We can, according to Jesus, have that same thing in us. It is called FAITH. Here is the clearest picture in the whole New Testament of what faith is and is not. It is not beliefs about Jesus, or God, or anything else. It has nothing to do with whether we think the right

religious thoughts or whether our religion is better than someone else's. It has to do with whether or not we are actually living with a deep trust in God, in life. It has to do with whether we are dominated by our fears or are working in our inward journey, learning to embrace our fears in the presence and love of God who made the seas and the winds.

A remarkable thing about this story, and indeed the whole way Jesus related to people, is that he believes we have it in us to be fearless, to be faith-full. His reprimand to the disciples is not a belittling putdown. He BELIEVES in them. Yes, he is disappointed. But he still expects them to grow in their capacity to have more faith than fear. Jesus believes that we can become less fearful and more faithful, and we can grow in this way as we live in his presence.

Jesus' own faith is a challenge and comfort to his disciples, and to us. When they say to each other, "Who IS this that even the wind and sea obey him?" they are marveling at his deep and complete faith, his fearlessness. When you have such faith, even a little bit, like that grain of mustard seed, you have already overcome the fierce winds and seas of life. They see it in Jesus. He tries to show them that it is in them, too, and never gives up on them.

Dealing with our fears so that we live with the kind of faith Jesus exemplifies and teaches is perhaps the most important thing we can do for ourselves, others and the world. Thich Nhat Hanh, after the end of the Vietnam War, when he was already exiled from his homeland, began to work on behalf of the boat people. He uses the story of boat people to teach the importance of maintaining our peace and stability, our fearlessness, for the sake of those around us and even for the world itself. Trying to escape conditions in their country, people crowd into small boats in which they try to cross the Gulf of Siam. Often the boats are overcrowded, and the rough seas and sometimes pirates threaten their survival on these perilous voyages. "Caught in rough seas or storms," writes Nhat Hanh, "the people may panic, and boats can sink. But if even one person aboard can remain calm, lucid, knowing what to do and what not to do, he or she can help the boat survive...One such person can save the lives of many." [*Being Peace*]

I think Jesus was trying to teach and show by his own life this same truth. Faith is a deep trust in God, in life, that enables us to embrace and quiet our fears. And when we practice this kind of faith, we are of the greatest help not only to ourselves but also to those around us. We need to become convinced of this, of how important it

is to practice this kind of peacefulness and fearlessness, this kind of faith. This is why we make our commitments to be on an inward journey, keeping a daily practice of prayer, meditation, study, and quiet sitting. As we do this more and more, we allow ourselves to identify and embrace our fears with compassion. We simply let our anxiousness and fretful thinking settle down and become quiet, not trying to drive out our fear and make a battlefield of our inner life.

As we grow in our capacity to understand and compassionately embrace our fears, then we rob them of their power. When we are running from our fears, we tend to lash out at people in impatience, anger, or violence. An angry person is most often a fearful person who perhaps has been hurt and is afraid of being hurt again. With this insight we can understand that our fears give rise to unhappiness and anger. But when we embrace our fears, seek to understand where they are coming from, and treat them with gentleness and compassion, things change. So we practice compassion with our own fears and with others in their fear. This is learning from Jesus how to be at peace and to calm storms, how to have faith.

A life lived on the basis of fear, whether as individuals, a society, a nation, or the human family, is a life that is lost. It is a life that tends always toward competition, confrontation, and violence. There is nothing admirable about such a life and all the values that are built upon such a fear-driven life are false and empty, not a sign of our true greatness as human beings. A life lived in faith, however, is a life that is open to God, to compassion, to creativity that nourishes life. And that is what Jesus was trying to teach the disciples. Why do you still have no faith? It is a reprimand, to be sure, but it comes out of Jesus' belief that people, that we have it in us to live fearlessly, to live faithfully. As we follow the living Christ and live in his presence, we become more and more who he believes us to be.