

Fear is a Liar  
Matthew 10:24-39  
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Our passage today is a continuation of last week's story about the mission of the twelve disciples. Remember, I likened the job of the disciples to some of the jobs Mike Rowe explores on his Discovery Channel show, *Dirty Jobs*. And, together, we wondered why anyone would sign up for the job.

This week's text does nothing to make the job sound any more appealing. Discipleship, after all, is not easy. The disciples were learners, learning from their teacher, Jesus. They were about to be turned loose to live out their learning. Jesus, as a follow up to the job description we talked about last week, encourages them not to be afraid...not once, not twice, but three times he addresses the fear he knows will come.

I wonder if it was reassuring to the disciples when Jesus said, "have no fear," or "do not be afraid." I remember the first time I went to a haunted house. I was waiting in line with my brother and our babysitter. I was a little bit apprehensive. I could hear creaks and groans and screams coming from the haunted house. Occasionally, I heard a chainsaw and saw people running screaming from the back of the house.

As we waited for our turn, my brother kept saying to me, "Don't be scared...it's fine." Even at 7 years old, I sensed that if someone was telling me not to be afraid, there was usually something to be afraid of. I've since realized that the person who is encouraging the other not to be afraid, usually knows something the fearful person doesn't know. In this case, my brother knew the chainsaw was without a chain and the person chasing people with the chainsaw, was our neighbor.

In the author of Matthew's story, Jesus knew there were things ahead that would cause the disciples to be afraid. He also knew that there was nothing ahead that was bigger than or more important than the message the disciples were being asked to deliver through the healing and compassion they were being entrusted with.

But let's be real for a moment. Has someone telling you not to be afraid ever kept you from being afraid? I imagine the disciples sitting there, afraid, even as they listened to Jesus telling them not to be afraid. The important thing for the disciples, I think, was not to allow that fear to keep them from doing the job they were being called to do.

This passage gives us a chance to reflect on our own role as disciples in the world today, which, we must acknowledge, is very different from the world in which Jesus and the twelve lived. The section begins with Jesus' observation that a disciple should be like the teacher. Well, what was Jesus, our teacher, like? We like to paint a picture of Jesus as a nice guy, who was a magnet for children, and always had something kind and comforting to say to everyone he encountered. Sometimes we even talk about his death as if he did absolutely nothing to provoke the people in power.

If he was a harmless, nice guy, why couldn't he stay out of trouble? Why would following him wreck families, "For I have come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother..." Why did political and religious leaders want him dead? Why did he end up on a cross? Jesus was a truth teller. He regularly spoke truth to and about the people in power. He spent time with people for which those in power had no regard. He showed compassion to people who, by society's standards, didn't deserve it. He was sarcastic and smart. This is the teacher the disciples and the first readers of Matthew were supposed to be like.

The opposition we face today to following the ways of Jesus is usually much more subtle than the opposition faced by Jesus and his contemporaries, but no less real. But we are called to the same truth telling, the same acts of welcome toward people who have been labeled “the other”, and the same compassion toward our neighbors. We are called to use our gifts, whether of sarcasm or song, to share the same message. And sometimes it will make us afraid.

But, we cannot let fear keep us from being like our teacher. You see, fear is a liar. Fear distorts the truth and, if we let it, will rob us of living fully into who we were created to be. It is clear to me from our passage today, that it is reasonable to expect that followers of Jesus, if we are doing it right, will be afraid sometimes. So, what do we do? In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela said this about fear, “I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.” It’s a great quote, and based on what I know about Mandela’s life, from protests to prisons, to the presidency of South Africa, he did, in fact, triumph over fear. But how? How do we conquer fear?

I believe our mission has to be bigger and more important than whatever we fear. And it is. We just forget that or we believe the lies fear tells us. Lies like our reputations and place in the community can’t survive criticism from people who disagree with us. Lies like we aren’t smart enough or good enough to make a difference in the world. Lies like failure is the worst possible thing that could happen. Lies like we are too old or too young to have a voice. Or that people who are different or disagreeable exist to hurt us. Fear is a liar and I promise you our purpose is bigger and more important than all of these fears. We are each here, not for ourselves, but because the world needs us.

I spent most of the last 3 days in Oklahoma City participating in Anti-Racism/Pro Reconciliation training with other leaders from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma. This training was for the task force that has been charged with the responsibility of developing a plan, purpose, and process for creating an anti-racism team in the Oklahoma region. This week, we received training that gave us common language, definitions, and history that will be useful as we begin this journey.

At the beginning of our time together, we were given an index card and asked to write our hopes for our time together on one side and our fears on the other. Afterward, we shared our answers. It was so interesting to hear the hopes and fears of this group of strangers who were different ages, men and women, different skin colors, lay people and clergy. The lists were so similar. The hopes centered on getting to know each other, learning together, and creating something new together.

And we all feared the exact same thing. Failure. We were a group of people with very different life experiences, who have earned degrees and achieved important things, and who are leaders in ministry, business, and social service organizations. And we sat there in that room, admitting that we were afraid to fail. What if the churches in the region are resistant to participating in this which we believe is so important? What if what we do doesn't change anything? What if my grandchildren grow up in a world that is just as divided as it is today? What if it's worse?

At the end of the weekend, one of the facilitators asked the group how we were feeling about our initial fears. In the meantime, we had heard stories about how racism had affected the people of color in the room, how they had been devalued and hurt. We had reviewed and were embarrassed and angered by the history of racism in our country. Our

fear was still there, but it no longer had power. We found courage in our mission which is bigger and more important than our fear. Dismantling racism is so much more important than our fear of failure and our fears that regional change will be hard and painful.

This text challenges us to seriously consider the cost involved in following Jesus. Are injustices against unfair lending practices to Blacks and Hispanics, unequal pay for women, inadequate healthcare, and environmental violence concerns for which we would risk our reputations and social status? What injustices are we willing to accept in order to ensure our own comfort? Have we chosen the comforts of financial security, superficial relationships, and status over the risky, sometimes scary job of following Jesus?

Through this passage, God speaks to us, people who are bombarded with the message that the world, as it is, is a scary place, and many of us feel disempowered, like there is nothing we can do to change it. And I think that is the scariest thing of all. We cannot let the fear that we are not enough keep us from being like Jesus. And conversely, we cannot let the fear that we really do have the power to change things keep us from working toward change. Change is scary too, isn't it?

Our purpose goes far beyond our individual lives, far beyond this church, and Bartlesville, OK. Simply, we were created for something big, something important...we were created to put the pieces of this broken world back together, to be disciples who have a realistic view of who this man we are following was, and who choose to be like him, replacing fear with courage and bringing hope to a world that, at times, seems lost.

What about you? What lie is fear whispering in your ear? Don't believe it. You are called. You are capable. You are courageous. Be like Jesus.

Speak truth to power. Spend time with people who need a friend.  
Rejoice in diversity. Risk being vulnerable.  
We are better together...all of us. Amen.