

I would like to do something a bit different today. I want you to take a minute or so to reflect on what makes you fearful, what is keeping you awake at night these days.

What you have identified could probably create a long list, a list as big as the number of folks who are here. Honestly, fear is normal. We all have fears. But I think you would agree with me that when our lives are driven by fear we don't do our best work, we aren't at our healthiest.

You may be surprised to know this, but sometimes what keeps me awake at night is you all. Although I am strong public person, I am a real people pleaser. I don't like when people are displeased or unsettled. I lie awake at night wondering whether what I had to say or what we together talked about disturbed people. I, like the prophet Jeremiah, have this strong sense that I am called to speak the truth. And the truth isn't always easy for people to swallow. We need to speak the truth, for example, about racism and the way it has impacted our lives and our country. But sometimes doing so is unsettling. And my basic personality orientation is not to unsettle. Yet I understand Jeremiah who says about God and God's call, "If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot."

I must speak, but I don't always like the consequences when I do, becoming fearful of what the consequences might be. I have felt that same fear even when teaching some of the basics of the faith. For some, how I view the faith is challenging, new to them, unsettling. I lie awake fearful that I have turned people's lives upside down, taken them to places they would rather not go, challenged some of their fundamental convictions that perhaps Mom and Dad taught them. Fear drives me, and I don't sleep well.

And my experience of fear doesn't stop with sleepless nights. It impacts how I live my live my wakeful moments. Not wanting to displease people causes me to do all kinds of things, sometimes good and sometimes not so healthy. I seldom say, "No," creating challenges for myself and for others. I sometimes back down on my convictions—all because I am afraid I might unsettle, disappoint, not please.

Fear is at the bottom of a lot of the human experiment. It drives many of us. And generally, we don't do our best work when we operate out of fear. We lose a lot of sleep. We say dumb things; we do dumb things, which is why fear-based politics and fear-based views of whole groups of people are especially problematic. When fear is our mode of operating we can turn other people into victims of our fear, and we turn ourselves sometimes into cynical, ugly human beings who reach not for, as James says, "the wisdom from above," the lofty, the high, but rather are content with "wisdom that is earthly, unspiritual, and devilish." We don't call for the very best in all of us, but rather are satisfied with our base instincts, with what is popular, what makes other people happy.

It is fear that seems to be operational in today's gospel lesson. Jesus, for the second time in the Gospel of Mark, tells his disciples that he "is to be betrayed into human hands, [and be killed], and after being killed, [to be raised again]." And Mark proceeds to tell us that his disciples didn't know what the heck he was talking about. They don't get this kind of wisdom. But who wants to grasp that the leader of your movement is going to be taken away? Who wants to experience the center of your life being eradicated? Who wants to feel your heart being torn in two?

This news, I am sure made them remarkably sad, but obviously also drove them into great fear. How will we go on? Will the movement be eliminated? Will these friends no longer be at the center of our lives? And if the movement goes on, who is going to run the show? Somebody in the group better posture himself to get the power

position. And so, we are told, they start arguing with each other about who is the greatest among them.

This is what fear leads to. When fear drives us, we don't do our best work. Fear takes us to a need to defend ourselves, protect ourselves, secure ourselves, promote ourselves. Fear takes us to a preoccupation with ourselves, which naturally leads to arguing, to conflicts and disputes, as James calls them, to envy and selfish ambition. When we are afraid, we often worry about our positions. When we are afraid that there won't be enough food at the potluck, we will work hard to make sure we find a place at the beginning of the line. When we are afraid that we may not look as good as the Jones' we will try as hard as we can to get what they've got. When we are afraid that being wrong means that ultimately we will lose our position or ultimately that we are no good, we will work hard to make sure that we am always right, even when we are not. When we are driven by fear, we seldom will be "peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy."

When we are afraid, we don't do our best work. Some people want to argue that in light of death itself, we humans live our whole lives afraid. Knowing that at one point we will die, that life will be taken away from us, fear-driven people spend most of their lives protecting ourselves, exerting their status. We may have to die, but we sure will have a whole lot more money than other people when we do; we will have accomplished more than others when we do; we'll have behaved better than others when we do.

And believe it or not, there are people who deal with life and death by tearing themselves down. Maybe if they can make themselves low on somebody's totem pole, they will have gained some points. This is what false martyrs and needy people do. Their work is wearisome. "I'm really not worth much. I don't know why you would want me around. I rather enjoy being at the bottom of the social barrel." In some convoluted way, these folks get points for not thinking very much of themselves. Driven by fear that they might be asked to

accomplish great things, driven by some upside-down point-keeping scheme, they live waiting for people to reject them. It's obvious: we don't do our best work when fear drives us.

Now you have to admit that when you confront Jesus you are being taken outside of a fear-driven world; you are confronting a whole new world—a whole new world that the disciples couldn't understand. In the midst of all of their fear, all of their battling over who is the greatest, Jesus brings them a little child. Here's the greatest, he says.

Children in Jesus' day were people without legal standing. They were the most vulnerable folks of his day. Jesus, through a little show and tell is revealing to them—those who have been arguing about status, who is right, who is popular—that in his world, his wisdom, life isn't about where fear take us. To be on the way with Jesus, as Mark puts it, to follow him, to live in his world, is not to live out of fear and the status-preoccupied life that fear brings, but rather to live out of trust—trust that sees life not as a product to get or a status to achieve, but a gift to receive. “Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” To welcome a child is to welcome the way of God. To welcome a child is to receive life as the gift it is.

Now I know that following Jesus seems so contrary to the way the world operates. I know that it's hard to leave fear behind, as my wakeful nights testify. I know that status or lack thereof is a human preoccupation. But you know what? The wisdom of the world doesn't get us what we really want. The wisdom of the world often takes us to arguments, conflicts, to the “cravings that are at war within us,” takes us to envy and selfish ambition. The wisdom of the world takes us to a lot of game playing.

Jesus takes us to a little child. To follow Jesus, to be *on the way* with him, means that all the game playing is over. All of our silly attempts in light of death to prove ourselves, to establish our status aren't necessary. David Lose says that in Jesus the “abundant life comes not through gathering power but through displaying vulnerability, not

through accomplishments but through service, and not by collecting powerful friends but by welcoming children.”

When we follow Jesus, all the games that we play to make ourselves look good, when truthfully we don’t look so good, are over. All of our needs to hide our vulnerabilities are proven unnecessary. We can tell the truth; we can be honest.

To be on the way with Jesus is to be taken to the cross, where we die, where we confront death, that which makes us afraid. But as Mark promises, Jesus will be raised again. In other words, death doesn’t speak the final word. To live “trusting the Jesus process” is, as a picture in my office proclaims, to live with confidence that death has lost its venomous sting.” And if that is the case, fear doesn’t have to reign. We can be less preoccupied with status. We can get on the ground and welcome and play with children. We can advocate for folks the world doesn’t value. We can be generous with our money and our compassion. We can be honest about our own needs and yes, even our own fears. We can begin the process of letting go of those fears. We can begin to let go of our need to be right, to be popular, to please everybody. Maybe we can even sleep better at night.