

Twentythird Sunday of Ordinary Time

Fear and Love

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“Say to those whose hearts are frightened, be strong, fear not!”

Fear must be fought. Fear is one of the most elemental, and most destructive forces in life. Wide-eyed, we become deaf and dumb— Deaf to the cries of others—so transfixed are we to the treats before us, dumb to our true desires and aspirations, as we seek to withdraw from all risk, and surrender all hope.

Our first reading from Isaiah addresses a people in the grip of such fear, as the brutal Assyrian army, having already wiped out the Northern Kingdom of Israel, now bear down on them. However inexplicably at the gates of Jerusalem, the terrorizing invaders stopped and turned back home. A plague had struck the enemies camp. To Isaiah that plague was heaven sent. Yahweh had vindicated his people’s faith in him. Isaiah depicts their salvation in poignant metaphors:

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened,
the ears of the deaf be cleared
Then will the lame leap like a stag
Then the tongue of the dumb will sing.
Streams will burst forth in the desert
The burning sands will become pools
And the thirsty ground, springs of water.

Today’s Gospel offers us the same good news. People bring before Jesus a man both deaf and dumb, who can neither hear others, nor speak himself, a man effectively locked up in himself. And even if he had somehow learned of Jesus, he can’t talk, how could he ask Jesus to heal him? He must be brought before Jesus by others who care for him, family likely. He cannot speak in his own name, those who love him must speak for him, begging Jesus to break him out of solitary.

Now Jesus usually heals by entering into dialogue. Yet how can Jesus dialogue with this man? He can neither speak nor hear. Yet he can still feel; and so Jesus uses the man’s sense of touch to touch his soul.. He places his fingers

into his ears, he spits and touches the man's mouth, and then with a groan he opens the man's ears and loosens his tongue.

Note how intimately these two gifts are connected. If we cannot hear, we will never learn to speak. Anyone who works with the deaf can tell you that. And if we cannot speak, what is there to hear?

To speak we must first listen. So too with overcoming fear. Though we feel we cannot even take care of ourselves, by turning and attending to the fears of others we can find our own fears and insecurities shrinking down to human size, even melting away altogether. For it is in practicing a love for others and learning their reciprocal love for us, that we find the courage to face our own fears, even ultimately turning from despising ourselves for our weakness to loving ourselves in our vulnerability.

And just what do we mean by love of self? Is that not selfish? But if we don't love ourselves, then to love others as we love ourselves is doing no one any favors. We have to learn how to love ourselves without being selfish.

The trick is not to love ourselves for our own sake, but to love ourselves for others sake, for God's sake. To love ourselves so that we might love others in a healthy way. And to love ourselves for God's sake? Well, God did make us, should we not appreciate the work of His hands? If our goal is to see God in all his works, that should include ourselves. We should learn to see God in ourselves. Not to see ourselves as God, but to see the finger of God in who we are becoming. The Gospel message is that God loves us, even though we be deaf and dumb to much that is good, God loves us, as a Father loves his children, as a mother loves the fruit of her womb. Should we not love all that God loves, including ourselves?

And once we find our voice, on the far side of fear, there is no stopping us. Boldness is the principle gift of the Spirit in Luke. From cowering deaf-mutes we become bold prophets, especially to those in whom we can recognize our own formerly enthralled spirits. We are impelled to reach out to them with that very same love that had saved us. No one can stop us from liberating others like our own former selves, for love banishes all fear.

May we have ears that can hear the love of others for us. And may we have tongues to respond in love to such love. In times of fear may we find resist the

urge to flee but standing our ground, and warm ourselves around the sacred bonfire of God's redeeming love.