

## All Are Chosen

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

April 5, 2015

By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

Fear is our theme for the month of April. Perhaps no scene in the Gospels better illustrates fear than Jesus praying and being betrayed in the Garden at Gethsemane. Admittedly this not an Easter story strictly speaking; but rather Maundy Thursday. But let us not be too nitpicky. Actually this moment in the Passion story is a favorite among our Unitarian ancestors. They point to it as an illustration of Jesus' humanity. I can see why. There is nothing more human than to feel vulnerable; to feel fear.

Fear abounds in Gethsemane. First and foremost of course is Jesus' fear of being handed over to his enemies. Having preached "Love your enemy and do good to those who curse you" back in chapter 5, he has to put it into practice here in chapter 26. The text infers that Jesus knows what will happen when they come for

him – he will be put to death. So he is in the very human predicament that we all face: he is alive and knows he is going to die. He is “deeply grieved even unto death.” Paul Tillich claims that this existential problem is the forge in which all religion emerges. Religion is the attempt to come to grips with that problem – being alive and yet knowing we will one day die. So it is appropriate perhaps that Jesus’ first impulse is to pray. When faced with fear, Jesus prays. And although he wishes for the company of his friends, ultimately he faces death alone.

Fear abounds in Gethsemane. It isn’t just Jesus who is afraid. There is Judas and the chief priests of the temple, and the people themselves. They had formed themselves into a mob armed with swords and clubs. Mobs are always motivated by hatred, and hatred is a form of fear. We hate that which we fear. Usually it is when we see in someone or some group part of ourselves that we do not like. And rather than dealing with our own insecurities and fears we project them onto a person or a group and just hate them instead. It is so much more satisfying in the short term. Jesus calls them out on this too – why are you

coming for me now when I was among you every day? Put down your sword. Hatred is fear of the other.

And fear abounds in Gethsemane. They say there are two ingrained responses our body has to fear: fight or flight. Stand your ground and fight, which is what the armed mob chose to do, or run away. The latter was the choice of the disciples. Despite their insistence of being with Jesus, having his back come what may, in the grip of soul-numbing fear, they run away. Push comes to shove, the disciples think first and foremost of themselves. Fear often makes us turn inward to our kind, our people, our family, and at times just ourselves. Fear is what makes our differences seem like obstacles; barriers. It reinforces our ego and our individual desires.

Let us pause a moment in our consideration of scripture and lift up what has been going on in our culture this week. We cannot consider fear, hatred and division without noting how dramatically these have played out in the state of Indiana this past week. You see we can't make the mistake of assuming that the stories in the Bible are about people a long time ago in land

far far away. They are about stuff that goes on in us and among us.

Indiana's law was legalized discrimination against gays and lesbians in the guise of religious freedom and toleration. You know people are up to something when they give their laws a sweet sounding name like "Religious Freedom Restoration Act." Who could be against that? It even took the identical name of the federal law. But hidden within the fine print were clauses that permitted business to refuse service to people simply for being gay. It smacked of the segregated South only around sexual orientation instead of race. Fortunately, it appears that public outcry both within and outside Indiana, will force the legislature and the Governor to reverse the worst parts of these laws. This event highlights both the effectiveness of public witness to speak truth to power and effect change, and the need for a vigilant news media. The latter is particularly needed in our society. I don't know which new organization broke the story, or had the patience to wade through that fine print of a bill to lift up the threat to democracy. Whoever it was, bless them. I don't know about you, but I could use a little less reporting on what Kim

Kardashian is doing, and a little more reporting on shenanigans like this that our politicians try to get away with!

In any case, this law in Indiana was based on fear. Fear of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. That fear creates division, and justifies division. It allows a business owner to say, “You are not welcome here because of who you are.” That fear and division leads to further hatred. And they knew it too, that is why they were so sneaky with these provisions in the bill. It may not literally be a mob with swords and clubs, but that Indiana law was a weapon – a weapon that would have done real harm to people.

So this is a story that has themes that are playing out among us even today. In the garden of Gethsemane, everyone is afraid and everyone reacts to that fear differently. The mob is afraid, and they react with hatred; they want to fight. The disciples are afraid and they desert their friend and teacher; they react with flight. Jesus is afraid, and he prays in the garden. He reacts with love. Notice what he is praying – “Not my will Father but yours be done.” Jesus is the only one in this scenario not thinking about

himself. Because you see fight and flight are not the only responses to fear. Those may be the ingrained, animalistic responses, but we humans have developed a third way: Love. When faced with fear, fear based on the knowledge of his own certain death, Jesus responds with selflessness and love. Even when people abandon him and he would have every right to feel bitterness. When one of his companions betrays him with a kiss, he calls him “friend.” He preaches peace – lay down the sword. Consider a new way. Not fight, not flight, but love.

That is arguably the ultimate Easter message. In the face of fear, respond with love. I think Christianity is at its best when it is preaching about love. Historically, the followers of Jesus, those who created the church, tried to respond to the fear of persecution and death with love. They had a word for responding to fear with love. Inspired by their master’s example, his life and his teachings, they developed this concept of responding to fear with love and gave it a name. They made this idea the center of their collective life together. Granted, at various points in history they were more successful than others, but the

ideal remained. To respond to fear with love was something they called “Ministry.”

And lo these many years later, I cannot think of a better definition of ministry than to respond to fear with love. In the face of fear, fear of death, fear of loss, fear of hatred, fear of injustice, fear of loneliness, fear of discrimination, the response is always love in some form or another. That fear is met by visiting people in the hospital, crying with families who have lost loved ones, marching to show solidarity with gun violence victims or marginalized people, and simply being together in the joy of fellowship so that we feel the warmth of this beloved community. Every one of those acts of love is meant to address fear in some form. Every one of those acts of love are called “ministry.”

Now you may notice something else about the examples I mentioned. While Rev. Michelle and I may have been the leaders in those various activities, we were not alone. Other staff do ministry too. They do pastoral care, create community, educate our young. But why stop there? You can push it further than those of us you have designated as ministers, beyond those of us

employed by the church. What we do is ministry, yes, but so do you. If the purpose of the church is to respond to fear with love, then it can't just be up to the people on the payroll to do it all. As Margaret Beard and Roger Comstock put it in the title of their book: *All Are Chosen*. Ministry is something that the entire church does, lay people and ministers in partnership. It is up to all of us to respond to fear with love. The popular term in our tradition for this is "Shared Ministry."

All are chosen for the work of ministry. Jesus did ministry in a very powerful way in Gethsemane when he chose to look at things from "God's point of view" so to speak. Now we may or may not want to phrase it that way, given our comfort with the concept of God, but the general idea is a good one. Maybe it is looking at something in your life from the perspective of the UU Principles. How do we find the inherent worth and dignity of EVERY person, not just our favorites or the people it is easy to love? In what ways am I interdependent upon others? Asking questions of ourselves like that can help us move toward that third way, the way of responding in love in the face of fear. All of us can do ministry.

It is also important to remember what shared ministry is not. It is not, and can never be, based on mistrust. Trust is as vital to ministry as air is to us. Mistrust is a form of fear, and therefore needs to be met with love. Shared Ministry may be shared, but it is still ministry. It widens the burden of having to respond to fear with love. Therefore shared ministry is not micromanaging. It is not craving power for oneself or limiting another person's power out of fear or spite. It is not about reclaiming a fantasy of some lost golden age that will one day return. All of these activities are based on fear. Shared ministry seeks that difficult, sometimes elusive, third way of love.

Perhaps the most eloquent statement about shared ministry comes to us from the late Rev. Gordon McKeeman. McKeeman, or "Bucky" as he was known, was a key leader among Universalist ministers during the merger. He practically single-handedly mentored an entire generation of UU ministers. I only met him a few times while I was in seminary, and he was finishing his career in, of all places, Indiana. There is probably no better authority on ministry than Bucky McKeeman.

I know we have already done meditation, but I want us to enter again into a spirit of quiet contemplation. If you feel comfortable, close your eyes. Think of someone you know who is afraid or has been experiencing fear. You can choose yourself if you have been experiencing fear. In your mind's eye, bring up this person's face. Keep that face in your mind as you hear these words from Gordon McKeeman entitled "Anyone's Ministry."

"Ministry is a quality of relationship between and among human beings that beckons forth hidden possibilities; inviting people into deeper, more constant, more reverent relationship with the world and with one another; carrying forward a long heritage of hope and liberation that has dignified and informed the human venture over many centuries; being present with, to, and for others in their terrors and torments in their grief, misery and pain; knowing that those feelings are our feelings, too; celebrating the triumphs of the human spirit, the miracles of birth and life, the wonders of devotion and sacrifice; witnessing to life-enhancing values; speaking truth to power; speaking for human dignity and equity, for compassion and aspiration; believing in

life in the presence of death; struggling for human responsibility against principalities and structures that ignore humaneness and become instruments of death.

It is all these and much, much more than all of them, present in the wordless, the unspoken, the ineffable. It is speaking and living the highest we know and living with the knowledge that it is never as deep, or as wide or as high as we wish. Whenever there is a meeting that summons us to our better selves, wherever our lostness is found, our fragments are united, our wounds begin healing, our spines stiffen and our muscles grow strong for the task, there is ministry."

May our shared ministry together respond to fear with love, courage, and wisdom. Amen Blessed Be.