

Fourth Sunday in Epiphany
RCL Year B
January 29, 2012
The Rev. Marguerite Alley

I have a friend who works for the Emergency Medical Service in my hometown. I saw him recently at a funeral of a high school friend and while we were chatting and catching up, I asked what was the most unusual emergency call he had ever been on. He thought for a bit and said, "Not too long ago we got a call from one of the local churches during a regular Sunday morning service. When we got there one of the ushers met us at the door and was really frantic because he thought that an elderly man had passed out in the pew and appeared to be dead. The usher said that he had checked and could find no pulse and there were no visible signs of breathing. What was so unusual about that I inquired? He said "we had to carry out four guys before we found the dead one". Hopefully I won't be the cause of anyone's demise here today.

Today we are going to speak openly and frankly about healing. I have struggled mightily with this lesson for the past two weeks. When I sat down to finally get my thoughts on paper I went off on a tangent about the connection between emotions and physical health, intending to make the point that fear and anger and anxiety are bad for us. But we already know that. They don't feel good. We don't need a scientific study to know that they are bad and that many of our health problems are directly related to our levels of stress, anxiety, anger and fear. I had to back up and start again because I sensed that I was headed in the wrong direction. As I was trying to figure out what drew me so strongly in that direction I began to wonder

if because we get so caught up in trying to figure out what the man was really suffering from or proving Jesus really healed him (or didn't) we miss the whole point of the story.

So why do we get so caught up in trying to prove or disprove this healing? First, I suspect that we have misunderstood the word healing. That is different than misinterpreting you know. The difference is subtle, but if you will bear with me for a moment, I think I can clarify it for us. Literally, **interpretation** is assigning a particular meaning or significance to something. So if we said that healing means passing judgment that would be a misinterpretation of the word. Conversely, **understanding** is the ability to perceive and explain the meaning or the nature of something. So if we were to say that healing means the symptoms of disease have disappeared then we are misunderstanding. Do you see what I mean? It seems like a subtle difference...but it can be rather significant in this circumstance.

To heal means to restore to wholeness that which is broken or injured. It also means to bring to an end; or to reconcile. So, if we misinterpret this we begin to believe that healing means the miraculous disappearance of the symptoms of physical or mental dis-ease. If we misunderstand it, then we fail to grasp what has occurred. So let's look back at our opening story. The fact that the man has collapsed and is no longer clutching his chest or gasping for air might be misinterpreted so as to suggest he has been healed. And in a certain sense that may be true. The symptoms HAVE in fact disappeared. On the other hand, if my friend had rushed over with an electric defibrillator, put the paddles to his chest and screamed "be healed" as he pressed

the fire button, one might also misunderstand what had occurred and believe that because the person had returned to “sinus rhythm”, he had been miraculously healed by my friend. While I am being somewhat playful, my point is quite serious.

As human beings our failure to understand, our inability to correctly assign the proper meaning to the word “Heal” constitutes (in our minds) a lack of credibility on Jesus’ part! In other words, because we don’t understand what occurred, because we have gradually lost sight of the meaning of the word as Jesus would have understood it, we now believe that it could not possibly have happened as reported, or we believe that it did happen quite literally exactly as WE envision it, and the symptoms of dis-ease miraculously disappeared. OK.....so what exactly does this mean?

I suspect that the simple truth of this story is what makes us so uneasy. And the simple truth is **that nothing is as strong as love**. Jesus is the embodiment of love and no fear or anger or anxiety stands a chance in the face of that unconditional, overwhelming and pure love. When faced with this remarkable love, our fight or flight response is triggered by the fear engendered from our inability to understand it. In other words, we are so scared by our lack of understanding that we either fight it (try to disprove it) or we run away from it (accept it without question as being simply miraculous).

Allow me again, if you will, a minor departure. Doctors are only now starting to understand and further research the body/mind connection, calling this new field Psychoneuro-immunology. The goal is to nail down the physical and molecular foundations of emotion and disease, using the latest medical technology, looking inside our brains, at hormones and at the immune system for answers.

I suspect that many folks might be quite fearful of the results revealed from these studies. For example, a researcher has discovered what he calls the “God” gene. The God gene hypothesis proposes that a specific gene predisposes humans towards spiritual or mystic experiences. My question is why is that so threatening? So, God hardwired us to be able to tune in...it makes perfect sense to me. Fear though is a tricky thing. While fear triggers the fight or flight response, and that has served us well in evolution, it also triggers what I call the “turtle”. We pull everything in and slam the door and we don’t poke our heads out until we think it is safe again.

Many medical doctors would agree that a large percentage of disease seems to be rooted in anxiety and fear. It is interesting to me that we are born with only 2 innate fears: a fear of falling and a fear of loud noises. All our other fears are acquired.

I once read an article that stated that there are only two emotions. Fear and Love and that all other behaviors stem from one of these two. When you think about it, it really rings true. Jealousy is a fear of losing something or someone, anger is a fear of humiliation or loss of control, joy is a love of life, relief is a love of peace and so forth. I think it is probably safe to say that God is motivated purely by love and we are motivated at least in part by fear. Everything that God does is done out of love for us.

God has done his part. We are created in his image, to be in community with God and with each other and we are created in love, for love and to love. Our part is to believe, to try and push back our fear and to be motivated by love. God's part is to enable us to rise above our fear. His love for us does that. Our love for one another is the embodiment of god's love for us. Love moves us out of self-centeredness and fear into healthy relationships with others. This extension of God's love for us is the way we overcome fear.

Fear imprisons. Love liberates. Fear paralyzes. Love empowers.
Fear sickens. Love heals. Fear makes us useless. Love makes us productive.
We are hardwired to tune into that perfect love...but we have to stop fighting it. We need to stop running from it and we must stop playing turtle because it is filling **us** with an unclean spirit and making us sick.