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THE BEREANS

ACTS 17:11

2 Timothy 1:7
Special Lesson #25
Managing Fear
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Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic panic

by Jim Abrahamson March 15, 2020

This week CNN's Michael Smerconish asked his viewers a question.

***“What do you fear most –
Becoming ill because of the coronavirus
or its financial impact on your life?”***

I suggest that there is something more fearful that should concern us, and it is what I want to address.

Our president declared the coronavirus as a National Emergency. In light of this, **physical hygiene and social protocol are very important** – hand washing, restricting unnecessary social contact, giving special attention to those who are most vulnerable (elderly with compromised immune systems, etc.), and caring for the welfare of others by example - not hoarding goods, encouraging others, and speaking the whole truth in love.

I suggest that **the spiritual hygiene and protocol that addresses anxiety** is even more important. My concern is that we too often respond to fear in a way that is counter-productive making the problem worse. When we do this we fall short of our calling to be fully human - bearing God's image in a world that is afraid and without hope.

This crisis can bring out the best and the worst in us.

Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous quote is worth repeating, "*The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.*" Fear (of the loss of life) may be the first fruit of the "Fall". It is the emotional response of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. When we excuse fearful behavior by saying, "I'm just human!" we are indicating that we have lost sight of what it means to be human. Fear, too often has reflected our mortality rather than our humanity. It is the robber of our security, the shaper of our life strategy, and the tool of the enemy of our souls. When our decisions are made on the basis of irrational fears, the results tend to make our condition worse, our peace less, and our path going forward more difficult. When we give in to our fears the results too often bring out the worst of us – isolating and segregating us into bitter, defensive, communities of conflict. This is not only hypocritical for those who claim to follow Jesus, it is unbecoming of those who claim to be humans made in the image of God. This need not be our response to life's fears.

Now to be sure, there is good reason to be anxious when our soul is untethered from its roots or ground of being. But for those who are “in Christ” by faith, there is good reason to be fearless, courageous, and secure apart from the challenge to our physical health, and falling retirement portfolio. A peace that is tethered to the temporal, material circumstances of this world hungers for security, significance, and serenity that cannot decay or be taken away. This hunger is satisfied in the Gospel’s King and his kingdom. Hard times should bring out the best in us. So how shall disciples of the Prince of Peace and as peacemakers in the face of the pandemic panic do this? I suggest five principles.

2 Timothy 1:7

“For God has not given us a spirit of fear,
but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”

1.

**We may not be able to control our circumstances
but we can control our responses.**

This is not a time for us to whine about the past or worry about the future. It may be a mystery as to how we got here and we may argue about who or what has made it worse. No doubt mistakes have been made and information has been distorted but this should not distract us from learning through what we experience and responding with faith, hope, and love to what we face. Finding fault will not remove anxiety but only add stress that compromises our immunity. This is not the first, nor will it be the last health / economic issue with far reaching effects. If we are wise, we (as a nation and individuals) will pass through this experience and be better off as a result. **As broken people in a broken world let’s do all we can to respond to life as “salt and light” showing and telling others how to manage fear.**

2.

We must take our baptism seriously.

The Spirit of Christ in us knows no fear. Consider the circumstances that Jesus and his followers courageously faced in the 1st century. Consider the heroic witness of the church in its 1st thousand years as it faced circumstances that we can hardly imagine. When we “die with Christ” through our baptismal union with him, we are set free from the fears that come with living as though this present life is all there is. As alien ambassadors in this broken world we should expect to bear a cross, as living sacrifices, displaying and declaring the salt and light of the kingdom. We should not be surprised by these events, nor should they intimidate us because we bear a cross to a banquet. **We should be energized by the opportunity these circumstances give us to develop and demonstrate faith, hope, and love.**

3.

We must recognize this crisis as an opportunity.

Fearful circumstances can be painful, confusing, and uncomfortable, but they can also be a CONTEXT for living lives as “salt and light”. We might say, it is harder to bear witness to the Gospel’s hope, the glory of the Kingdom, and the power of God’s Spirit, when life is going well. It is when faith, hope, and love, are most needed that they are most likely to be seen and welcomed. A cultural / personal crisis like this pandemic is a “stage call” for Jesus in the form of his disciples. Our light shines brightest in the dark. **The inner peace that we display to those around us is a bright light in a dark space. The empathetic care we offer to those in need will not be forgotten. The civil responsibility we take will shape our communities (CARPE DIEM seize the day) and bear witness to our hope in Christ.**

4.

We must renew our minds.

This is a great opportunity to optimize our spiritual perspective, priorities, presumptions, and plans. When I call Apple support for help with my computer one of the first things they have me do is restart it, and run a diagnostic app that cleans it up, optimizes, and calibrates the system. Over time, our minds like my computer get gummed up and need to get back to their designed functionality. There are strong cultural winds that gum up our inner posture in ways that are contrary to our calling to be Spirit filled and healthy. I suggest that there are four areas that often need optimizing in our spiritual lives - perspective, priorities, presumptions, and plans. Lets briefly look at each of them.

We need to first develop a broad **perspective** – see the big picture and the long-term affect of our decisions. Short sightedness is a characteristic of “walking by sight” not faith. When our hope is in this world, or in the material circumstances (physical health or financial security) we invite anger and anxiety. When we see beyond the temporal / material circumstances, we gain a perspective that is a panic killer if not a pain killer.

We also need to embrace Kingdom **priorities** – making sure that we keep the main thing the main thing - major on majors and minor on minors. For example, developing character is more important than finding material comfort and petitioning God for inner power to work through our outer circumstances may be more important than changing our circumstances. Note that the failure to distinguish priorities in the kingdom of God is Satan’s favored trick. He used it successfully on Eve in Gen.3 and unsuccessfully on Jesus in Matt.4.

Realistic **presumptions** (expectations) are vital to a life of peace. If we expect this broken world and our broken lives to be the “end game” of God’s plans for creation, we are most to be pitied. If we think that God will glorify our circumstances and this temporal body in this life we have not understood the true hope of our calling. Hard times are God’s visual aid to wet our appetite for Christ’s return, and clarify our call to be the Body of Christ, the incarnation of Jesus to our generation.

Finally, we need to develop **plans** to respond to the temptation to panic in the face of trouble. We need to view the anger and anxiety that naturally come with pain to be trailheads that lead us to the deeper condition of our heart, which can be either fear or faith. As we anticipate anxiety for example, we should wisely **plan our response to it**. If this is done before the “fear emotion” takes us to a dark place, our planned response can help us renew our minds and respond from a position of inner peace. Such planing develops spiritual “muscle memory” for walking in the light.

5.

We must embrace the right kind of hope.

If our hope is in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. We are called to first be peace seekers, who know the “shalom” that comes through reconciliation with God through faith in Christ. This reconciliation is first a positional (legal) justification, secondly, an inner posture of (psychological) rest, and thirdly, a place of (sociological) significance as we display God’s love to those around us. Christianity that does not start with the individual does not start. Christianity that ends with the individual ends. We are called to make a difference in this world, but this will demand that we:

1) **KNOW** ourselves
as sinners that are worth saving,

2) **ACCEPT** ourselves
as redeemed, beloved of God,
bearing His image, and empowered by His Spirit,

3) **FORGET about** ourselves
as those who are living sacrifices,

4) **GIVE** ourselves
as alien ambassadors in service of God and those He loves

We can do this!

2 Timothy 1:7

“For God has not given us a spirit of fear,
but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”

Tis The Set Of The Sail -- Or -- One Ship Sails East

by Ella Wheeler Wilcox

**But to every mind there openeth,
A way, and way, and away,
A high soul climbs the highway,
And the low soul gropes the low,
And in between on the misty flats,
The rest drift to and fro.**

**But to every man there openeth,
A high way and a low,
And every mind decideth,
The way his soul shall go.**

**One ship sails East,
And another West,
By the self-same winds that blow,
'Tis the set of the sails
And not the gales,
That tells the way we go.**

**Like the winds of the sea
Are the waves of time,
As we journey along through life,
'Tis the set of the soul,
That determines the goal,
And not the calm or the strife.**