

“THE FEAR FACTOR”

Matthew 6:25-34

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Homewood, AL – May 25, 2008**

The reality show, *Fear Factor*, was NBC's answer to the hugely popular *Survivor* series. The show is aptly named. Each week contestants were asked to do disgusting and fear-inducing tasks in order to win a cash prize. The horrible things include eating insects such as a cockroach, jumping from heights, navigating through underwater courses, being locked in a confined space and recently, running an obstacle course where the electricity literally might shock you. It's not a show I regularly watch but every now and then, while channel surfing, I have caught a few minutes of this show. There is a kind of morbid sense of fascination watching people do things which are disgusting and frightening to see how far they will go before fear overcomes them.

This is one case where it is not that far from reality TV to reality. As oil and food prices soar, our anxieties have risen along with them. A recent poll revealed that three in five Americans think that the economy is in the worst shape they have experienced in their life time. Millions of Americans are afraid of losing their health insurance, their jobs, their homes. Despite the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security after 9/11, and expenditures of billions of dollars, almost 40% feel that the U.S. is more vulnerable to attack today than it was six years ago. There has never been another era in modern history, even during wartime or the Great Depression, when so many people have feared so much. Three out of four Americans say they feel more fearful today than they did twenty years ago. And why shouldn't we be fearful? There is much to be frightened about – from drugs on our streets, to terrorists on our borders – we are living in a scary time.

So what do we do with these words of Jesus, “I tell you, do not worry about your life....” That's easy to say: Don't worry, be happy. But it simply isn't realistic, is it? Telling us not to worry doesn't square with the facts. We have every reason to be fearful, on guard. We can't just bury our heads in the sand and pretend that we aren't facing factors which should give rise fear.

So what does Jesus mean telling us not to worry? Certainly his world was no less fearful than ours. In fact, it was more so. He was living in an occupied nation, under the threat of the sword. There was no safety net for people – no social security for the old, no Medicare, no food stamps. It sounds like a cruel joke to tell people not to worry given the hard realities of their lives.

Thank you, Jesus, for the advice, but you just don't get it. We aren't talking about made-for-television fear, we are talking about the world we live in. “Do not worry about you life....” Well, somebody better be worried about what's going on and what the future holds.

I am glad we have people who worry enough to plan for disaster relief so that when the disaster strikes we are prepared to respond. Events in the nation of Myanmar, or following Hurricane Katrina, have taught us what happens when you don't worry, aren't concerned. Fear is a normal, necessary, healthy response to danger. It can motivate us to be prepared, plan wisely, to minimize the dangers.

But this is not the kind of fear and worry that Jesus is talking about. He prefaces his warning not to worry by saying, “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other.” The kind of fear and worry which Jesus warns us against is the kind that feeds on itself, distorts our view of reality, causes us to misread the situation and enslaves us. “Just look,” Jesus said. “Look at the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them.” It’s what we overlook that can cause us to fear.

Sociologist Barry Glasser has written a book called the *Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things*. In it, he lists some interesting facts. During the 1990’s crime rates plunged in our nation, but two thirds of Americans believed they were soaring. Life expectancy in the United States has doubled during the 20th century. We are better able to cure and control diseases than any other civilization in history. Yet we hear that phenomenal numbers of us are dreadfully ill. In 1996, Bob Garfield, a magazine writer, reviewed articles about serious diseases published over the course of a year in the Washington Post, the New York Times and USA Today. He learned – in addition to 59 million Americans with heart disease, 53 million with migraines, 25 million with osteoporosis, 16 million with obesity, and 3 million with cancer – that 543 million Americans are seriously sick. A shocking number in a nation of 266 million inhabitants. “Either, as a society, we are doomed or someone is seriously double-dipping,” he suggested.

It is the perception of danger that has increased, not the actual level of risk. We live in a culture, he concludes, where people and organizations manipulate our fears and profit from them. Politicians play on our fears to get elected. Advocacy groups exaggerate the prevalence of some diseases and issues in order to raise money. The media trots out a new fear every week to garner ratings. Fear sells.

Garner concludes that, “The peddlers of fear cost Americans dearly. Individually we are weighed down by needless worries, and as a nation we waste billions of dollars combating minor or non-existent dangers, while we neglect the real problems.”

This is what Jesus is getting at. We can over estimate the dangers, exaggerate our fears, and overlook the resources we do have. This is what Jesus is telling us. “Why do you worry so much. Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow,” Jesus said. “They neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you that even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.” Don’t let fear distort your vision of life. Don’t operate on the basis of fear. Because fear can cripple.

As this nation was at its lowest point during the great depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt put his finger on the problem. “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” he said. No other presidential address matches Roosevelt’s First Inaugural in the directness and immediacy of its impact. At the end of the speech, witnesses say, the applause was thunderous, rolling like waves. The President clapped in rhythm with the crowd. To the millions more listening on radio, the effect was even greater, more intimately felt, almost personal, as if he were speaking to each American individually. Any speech can be heard. This one, the audience actually lived. The President’s confidence became the nation’s own.

In the morning papers, the press – hardened and skeptical then as today – reflected the relief and exultation of a weary people. “No more vital utterance was ever made by a president of

the United States," read an editorial in the Atlanta Constitution. "Confidence literally arose from its hiding place and is today a living reality," another journalist wrote. Psychologically he knew, fear is more paralyzing than polio, more depressing than the greatest depression, and as crippling as war. When we act on the basis of a distorted fear, we don't always act in our own best interest.

In the wake of the 9/11 disaster, thousands of people altered their travel routines because they feared flying. They began to drive everywhere they had to go. As a result, it has been estimated that 5,000-6,000 additional people lost their lives in accidents on the highways – which in fact are many times more dangerous than the skyways. These people perished needlessly as victims of fear that had little basis.

When we see through the eyes of fear, we also learn to mistrust others. We don't take time or make the effort to discover the truth. We think the worst which can lead us to do the worst.

Several years ago in Baton Rouge, a 16-year-old Japanese exchange student by the name of Yoshihiro Hattori and a friend were searching for a Halloween party to which he had been invited. Thinking they had found the house, they knocked at the door. Not knowing they were at the wrong house they startled the occupants. Having the front door slammed in their faces, they were walking back to the car when they heard the carport door open. They turned back around and were confronted by the owner shouting, "Freeze!" while pointing a gun at them. The student did not understand the command. He stepped toward the man and was shot in the chest and killed. A victim of fear.

Fear led to mistrust which led to tragedy. Seeing danger where there was none took a life for no reason. We can only wonder how much of the violence in our world is based on fear that has no basis – fear that causes us to see the worst, and do the worst.

Jesus said, Why are you worried and fretful? Just look around you. Look at the lilies of the field, the birds of the air, the world is not as fearful as you sometimes think.

One hundred and twenty-five times Jesus tells us in the Gospels not to be afraid, not to worry. Only eight times does he speak of the great command to love. If sheer volume counts, Jesus doesn't want us to live fearful, fretful lives. God does not want us to live in fear. Fear which distorts our lives and our actions. Fear that can cripple us. Fear that causes us to question and forget God. "Look," Jesus said, "at the birds of the air, the lilies of the field, are you not of more value than these. Does God not care more about you than these?" Do you think that God will forget you; that you are beyond God's love and care? And, maybe that is the root-cause of our fear. Fear of being abandoned, left alone, fear that no one knows, no one cares.

Howard Thurman was an African American theologian during the middle of the last century. Thurman himself, a grandson of slaves, worked to help his fellow African-Americans who were just a few generations removed from slavery and were not yet seen as equal by their fellow citizens. He wanted them to understand how they could live as noble and free citizens, and how they could live free from fear despite their constant abuse and mistreatment at the hands of others.

At the end of his chapter on fear in his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman tells this story from his childhood. It's about Halley's Comet's visit to the solar system. Thurman says he

heard about the comet from other boys but hadn't been permitted to see it because he wasn't allowed to stay up past sunset. His friends had told him perfectly amazing and wonderful things about the comet. He also had heard about something called "comet pills." The pills were being sold as a form of protection. It was promised that if the comet's tail hit the earth, those who had taken the pills would not be consumed by the fire.

One night he was awakened by his mother who told him to quickly get dressed and to come out with her to the backyard to see the comet. He and his mother stood together in the backyard, both of them silent looking up in utter awe. Eventually Thurman felt brave enough to speak. With fear and trembling in his voice he looked up at his mother and asked, "What will happen to us if that comet falls out of the sky?" His mother stood in silence for a long time. Thurman says he looked up and saw the same sort of look on her face that he had only seen once before when he entered into her room and found her in prayer. When she finally spoke, she said to him, "Nothing will happen to us, Howard, God will take care of us."

Thurman finishes his chapter with these words: "O Simple hearted mother of mine, in one glorious moment you put your heart on the ultimate affirmation of the human spirit. Many things I have seen since that night. Times without number I have learned that life is hard, as hard as crucible steel, but as the years have unfolded, the majestic power of my mother's glowing words has come back again and again, beating out its chant in my own spirit. Here are the faith and awareness that overcome fear and transform it into the power to strive, to achieve, and not to yield."

"Nothing will happen to us... God will take care of us." Thanks be to our gracious, loving, and caring God. Amen. "Don't worry, don't be anxious or fearful about your life. Look at the birds of the air, look at the lilies of the field..." And then, look to God, who stands behind it all! How much more does this God care for you.