

Idolatry

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Friends, after reading over my sermon, I have found too many typos! My proofreader is out of town on vacation. Please delete the other sermon and use this one.

Frank

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO PEANUTS

I have an old book in my office with an unusual title, "The Gospel According to Peanuts."

Peanuts, of course, was a comic strip in which the actions of the children represented very grownup problems. And according to the author of that book, the gospel's answer to those problems is often hinted at in the comic strip.

One of these little ones had a problem that bedevils many of us. His name was Linus. And Linus was afraid. He was so afraid that everywhere he went he carried around a blanket for security.

The children always teased him about it.

One day Charlie Brown pointed out to Linus that he couldn't carry that blanket around forever. He asked, "What are you going to do when you get too old to drag that blanket around?"

And Linus replied, "Who knows? I've been thinking seriously of having it made into a sport coat!"

It can be done you know. From sports coats to sports cars, we turn to the strangest things for security. We never outgrow our need for a security blanket. We just transform that blanket into something more elaborate and usually something that is quite expensive.

IDOLATRY

The desire for a security blanket is the root cause of the sin that the Bible calls idolatry.

Idolatry lies at the heart of conspicuous consumption. The reason people want more and more is because there is a hole in their hearts that they are trying to fill. They are looking for security in all the wrong places.

Several years ago I watched a TV special about the rise of the personal computer industry.

The upshot of that whole show was that Bill Gates, the president of Microsoft was the big winner in that revolution. He had become king of the computer industry through some very clever business decisions.

But, success did not seem to give him comfort. On the contrary, according to one analyst, one of the richest men in the world is driven by a fear of loosing everything to someone who is even more clever than he.

The fear is not irrational. Even the wealthiest person is one lawsuit away from bankruptcy.

As Willie Nelson once said after tangling (unsuccessfully) with the IRS,

"No matter how high they pile the money, they can still take it away."

Are you afraid that your security blanket might be taken away? Perhaps we need a better security blanket, a security blanket that no one can take away.

FEAR IN THE BIBLE

The Bible has a lot to say about fear. Mainly the Bible just says "don't do it."

Ninety nine times the phrase, "Don't be afraid" is used.

It was what God told the prophets.

It was what the angels told the shepherds at the birth of Jesus.

The apostle Paul said the same thing in his letter to the Philippians. He wrote, "Don't worry about anything ..." (Philippians 4:6)

And, it was what Jesus said as well. He told his followers, "Have no anxious thought about tomorrow."

"Don't worry. Don't be afraid" Everywhere the Bible gives us the same advice. If only we could take that advice, counselors would have a lot less work to do. But, I don't think the counselors have any reason to worry.

LEAVING OUR SECURITY BLANKETS

The Bible may tell us not to be afraid, but that's a lot easier said than done. The very act of following Jesus can put us into some fearful situations.

As we said last week, Jesus did not say that following him would lower our blood pressure.

If anything following Jesus is a hair raising thrill ride. Following Jesus puts into a situation where there will be conflict and fear.

That's the main thrust of today's passage. Jesus said, "If they persecuted me, they're going to persecute you. If they said the devil made me do it, they will say the devil made you do it as well."

If you're looking for something that will bring peace to your family, don't look to me.

My kingdom is about new values that might well cause division in your family ... setting a son against his father and a daughter against her mother."

Aren't you glad we selected this passage for Father's Day? So much for family values.

This is a very disturbing passage. It is a message we don't want to hear. We want a religion that acts as a kind of security blanket. We want a religion that heals all wounds and makes us feel better.

But, this passage, like so many others, tells us that we must give up our security blankets if we are to follow Jesus.

FINDING OUR LIFE

It's a funny thing about fear. We think that we can overcome it by retreating from those things that we fear. But, usually, just the opposite is the case. The fears only intensify.

Any attempt to make our life totally secure usually has the opposite effect. We become even more fearful. It takes our life away. We cling to things so tightly that we lose our grasp on what is really important in life.

That's what Jesus meant when he said,
"Those who find their life will lose it, ..."

To put it another way, if we concentrate too much on our fears, we will find that our fears come true.

For example, if we are overly concerned about what others think about us, if we are always concerned about having friends, ironically, we may find that we have very few friends, if any.

Our fears can drive people away.

It is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

If we are worried about losing in some way, sure enough we do. Jesus said that, strangely enough, only those who lose their life for him and for the gospel really find themselves.

GOOD FEAR

The Bible talks about two kinds of fear. There is a bad fear, the fear that we have been talking about, a fear of losing everything. This fear is an insecurity that prevents us from being all that we are called to be in Christ Jesus.

And then there is a good fear.

In the Bible this fear is called "the fountain of life, the beginning and source of all wisdom." This fear "adds length to one's life."

It is a fear in which the prophets took delight. And it was this fear that helped the early church survive and even thrive in a very hostile world.

Many of you know what I'm talking about. I'm talking about what the Bible calls the "fear of the Lord."

I would suggest that we shouldn't fight the bad fears in our life by running away from them but by cultivating a good fear, the fear of the Lord.

You've heard of fighting fire with fire?
I suggest we fight fear with fear.

HOLY FEAR

The fear of the Lord is not an anxiety born from uncertainty. The fear of the Lord is a sense of the holy. When we talk about the fear of the Lord we remind ourselves that God is in charge.

The creed of the early church was deceptively simple. They said, "Jesus is Lord." In other words, Jesus is in charge. Jesus is the only one in a position to make a judgment on our lives.

The apostle Paul conveyed the same message in his letter to the Romans. He wrote, "Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ."

Jesus told his disciples in our lesson for today, "Don't be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of one who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

Sometimes our fears betray our true feelings.

On this passage Calvin wrote, "If the fear of God is extinguished by the dread of men, is it not evident that we pay greater deference to them than to God himself?"

In today's world, I think that God might be telling us,

"Don't spend too much time worrying about those who would spread terror.

Your fear of them is causing you to give too much deference to them and not enough to Me. Don't spend too much time worrying about your future."

Jesus is Lord. That's all you know. And that's all you need to know."

COURAGE

Jesus told his disciples that courage would be required if they were to preach the gospel in a hostile world.

William Barclay in his commentary on this passage told of a minister named Latimer who was preaching one day while the king was present. He knew that what he was about to say would be unpopular with the king so he carried on a conversation with himself in the pulpit.

He said, "Latimer, Latimer be careful what you say. The king is here."

And then, answering himself, the preacher continued, "Latimer, Latimer, Latimer be careful what you say, the king of kings is here."

It was said of John Knox as they buried him,
"Here lies one who feared God so much that he never feared the face of any man."

Oh that the same could be said of us at our funeral!

We struggle and are frightened by so many things in our life.
If we could only get our fears in order!

If only we could get just a glimpse of the awesome God who created the heavens and the earth, we could banish fear from our lives forever.

FEAR AND GRACE

Yes, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. But, lest we get the wrong impression, let us once again remember that this fearsome God is also a God of grace.

The apostle Paul did write in his letter to the Romans, "Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ."

But, what kind of judge is Jesus? The Scripture tells us. "Christ died for us. Christ rose for us. Christ reigns in power for us. Christ prays for us."

In other words, the judge is on our side. The judge is for us in every way possible. The judge is even willing to give his life for us. The judge is also our lawyer!

Jesus told his disciples,

[29] Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. [30] And even the hairs of your head are all counted. [31] So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. Matthew 10:29-31 (NRSV)

In Luke's version of this saying, it is five sparrows that are sold for two pennies. The sparrows cost ½ cent a piece. But, if you bought four birds, the fifth bird was thrown into the deal for nothing.

And yet, according to this passage, God's eye is on that sparrow. Others may think that these little birds are of little value, but God's eye is even on the one that costs nothing.

If God looks after the sparrows, how much more will God care for us?

The God who cares about a trivial bird also cares about our trivia. Jesus also said that "even the hairs of your head are numbered."

Do you know how many hairs you have on your head? I don't know.

I do know that the count is going in the wrong direction! But, aside from that, I don't know.

The Bible tells us that God knows.

In other words, God knows us better than we know ourselves. Such personal and detailed knowledge of our life is an awesome thing to contemplate.

And it is something that we should contemplate.

Meditating on that providential care can cultivate a fear of God that will tame all other fears.

It gives a peace that passes all understanding, a faith that will enable us stand with confidence in a constantly changing and uncertain world.

ANXIETY

Someone once wrote about the modern world,

"Men and women now rejoice that to some extent they have been freed from the fear of hell fire, not realizing that they have instead been condemned by the fear of nothingness."

If we do not fear God, and if we do not fear hell (which is separation from God), then we believe in nothing and that emptiness is fearful indeed.

If I had to characterize the modern world in one word, I would use the word "anxiety." We live in a world filled with anxiety.

Anxiety is that vague fear.

Anxiety is an uneasy feeling that hangs on for no apparent reason. Anxiety is the suspicion that something just isn't right, but we can't put our finger on the source of our discontent.

I think that anxiety can often be a symptom of a deeper spiritual need.

Anxiety suggests that we may be putting our faith in the wrong things. Anxiety suggests that we are not willing to risk all that we have for that one thing which is most important.

WILLING TO GIVE OUR LIFE

Scott Carpenter was an astronaut who had the opportunity to be a part of the mission to the moon. In preparing for this mission, he wrote this letter to his wife to be read should things go terribly wrong. He wrote,

"The project of being an astronaut and going to the moon, gives me the possibility of using all of my capabilities and all of my interests and gifts at once. This is something that I would be willing to give my life for."

Now don't misunderstand. Scott loved his wife and family. He concludes his letter this way,

"My dear, if this comes to a fatal, screaming fiery end for me, I will have three regrets. I will have lost the opportunity to prepare for my children's life here on this planet. I will miss the pleasure of seeing you and loving you when you are a grandmother. And I will have never learned to play the guitar."

Scott had something that he was willing to give his life for. It was a mission that gave his life purpose and direction. The fear of not trying to do this great thing overcame his fear of losing all that he held dear.

This same sense of purpose and mission should motivate the disciple of Christ.

SPIRITUAL SUICIDE

A great artist lost heart and quit trying to achieve greatness in his art. Instead, he became content with work that was less than his best effort. This took a great toll on him personally, so much so that he even attempted suicide.

Someone wrote of him,
"His creative energies degenerated into hobbies."

I think that as disciples of Jesus Christ, we should not be afraid of death. We should be afraid of not living. We should be afraid of letting the Christian faith become one more hobby among others.

Such an approach is spiritual suicide.

Instead, Jesus leads us in a different direction. He tells us that if we lose our life for his sake we will find it.

May God give us the courage to do just that.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN