

“Be Not Afraid”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

There is, throughout the Bible, this existential sense of anxiety. The words “do not be afraid” or “do not fear” show up 107 times in the Bible, and the word “fear,” itself, shows up 314 times.

Over and over again, the Bible deals with fear and how to overcome it. I was thinking about that, when I saw an article in the paper, and then saw it on TV, about a man in California - from Union City, California, and he was the chief of police. I’m gathering you probably saw this as well. His name was Darryl McAllister. Darryl McAllister was, by all accounts, just a wonderful police chief, but he had one difficulty - he had a son who was trouble. He had daughters who were just great - everything went well. But his son, Tyrone, was nothing but a troublemaker and, so, on this particular day in Manteca, California, he heard - over his own police wire - his name, his son’s name, Tyrone McAllister, and his heart sank yet again.

You see, his 18-year-old son, Tyrone, and a 16-year-old friend had visualized a man in a turban, and thought this man must be up to no good; so they went over and they kicked him - punched him until he was laying on the ground, and then kicked him some more and spit on him. This man’s name was Sahib Singh Natt, and Sahib is 71 years old. Now imagine, 71 years old and you are being pummeled by an 18- and 16-year-old, for no other reason than you are wearing a turban.

I thought about this, as a father. What would you do? You are the chief of police and you have lived your life trying everything that you could. But for the last several years, everything he and his wife did to raise their son well had fallen on deaf ears. No matter what they did, it just didn’t work.

So this week, Darryl and his wife had to read, for all of the world to hear, a statement about his son. And I want to read it, because the words are just so powerful: He said, “Words can barely describe how embarrassed, dejected and hurt my wife, daughters and I feel right now.” He continued, “Violence and hatred is not what we have taught our children. Intolerance for others is not even in our vocabulary, let alone our values. Crime has never been an element in our household, our values, nor the character to which we hold ourselves.”

It was a beautiful statement, but any parent would ache inside, because I’m sure he’s telling the truth. Everything he did, everything they did as a couple, and somehow their son just wasn’t getting it. You could blame the friends he ran around with. You could blame whatever you could come across, but in the end there is no real answer. And, I wondered, what in the world would a parent do in a situation like that? If they say, “I’m done with you. Get out.” Then you are too harsh. If you say, “Gee, I love you, but I don’t like what you are doing; but I love you and come back home.” Then it will be said that you’re just an enabler. There is no right answer.

I ache for him, and I think what Darryl and his wife, as they wrote that statement, were feeling more than anything else, more than shame, more than despair, was fear. A fear that everyone would think that they were horrible parents; the fear that they didn't do the job of parenting that they should have done; a fear that their child will never *get it* through his thick skull, all of the things they tried to teach him, all of the things that their daughters got, but he wasn't getting. That fear can just destroy a family. So we all need to be praying for that family - for Darryl and his wife, for his daughters and his son, Tyrone, and the 16-year-old boy, who is just as big a dope as Tyrone was, as well as for Sahib and his family, who are suffering. as well.

The reason I tell you that story is because it strikes with something I never thought about. I declared a religion major 37 years ago and I have been studying, I thought, rather well, but every time I go through, and I do another sermon, and I study the exegetical background, something new pops out. What popped out to me in the study of the Bible from John 6:11-21, in this story of walking on the water, which appears in all four Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - that I have probably preached 14 or 15 times and, John's chapter at least 4 or 5, and I never got it right, because I never realized the nuance until this week.

In the three synoptic Gospels - now the synoptics are Matthew, Mark and Luke, and they are synoptic - they are similar - because they were written closer to the same time. All talk about Jesus being fine with the Apostles. They were having a good time, but Jesus needed some time alone, after the feeding of the five thousand or the four thousand.

But, in the Gospel of John, I just realized, it is a little bit different, and you have to go all the way to John 6:66 and 6:67, where it says, "*Because of this, many of his Disciples turned their back and no longer went away with him.*" So Jesus asked the twelve, "*Do you also wish to go away?*" They are running from Jesus in the Gospel of John. Because of this, many Disciples turned their backs and no longer went away with him. They were leaving Jesus. They were fed up with Jesus. They kept saying to themselves, "Why are we putting up with Jesus? He had an opportunity here and he blew it." So they thought.

Now, I still don't know what it was. Was Jesus becoming too political, because he was sure fighting the Romans? Was Jesus becoming too passé, in caring for too many people and missing the real ministry? I don't know. And is 6:66 a numerical meaning, that the worst thing you could do is deny God and walk away from our Triune God?

Whatever the case may be, the greatest fear, the greatest sin, is to walk away from God, and yet that, in the Gospel of John, is what the Apostles did. They got in that boat, not to give Jesus some time alone, not to leave Capernaum, but to give up on Jesus. They said, "Enough. I'm sick of Jesus. He is not the Messiah I wanted. He is not doing it my way, and I'm not putting up with it anymore," and they got in the boat to leave him.

Now there is a really good reason why I'm not the Messiah. Maybe there are a couple good reasons why I'm not the Messiah. [Laughter.] But one of them is that, if those 12 had walked out on me, I would have said, "Good riddance. Get out of my neighborhood. I will go find 12 of you who are better - and it wouldn't be hard, you bums. Number one, you are a bunch of fishermen and tax collectors. I can find you anywhere, and I can probably find better ones, so *get out* of my life." And, that's part of the reason I'm not the Messiah.

But Jesus didn't do that. As hurt as Jesus must have been - and Jesus had feelings because he was fully human as well as fully Divine - he pulled himself up, probably mad - because Jesus got mad, we know that, because he turned over some tables at the Temple, and he probably wasn't walking gingerly like this [Scott took cautious steps], he was probably stomping out to get them on that boat. The reason there was, probably, a big storm going on, because Jesus was *blowing* the storm out his ears.

But, as mad as he was, as frustrated as he was, as *unbelievably* demanding as he thought they were being, he stormed out on that water anyway, and he went out to them, and he saved them - because Jesus never gives up on anyone. Jesus had every right to let them go and drown out there in that Sea of Galilee, find 12 better ones and get on with the ministry that would have gone a heck of a lot better; but once you are called by God, you Elders and Deacons, you little babies (who were baptized) called at the font, God will never leave you, God will be madder than a hornet at you. God may stick you in a storm once in a while, but God will walk to the ends of the earth for you, to save you, to forgive you and to start again.

And if I happened to be Darryl McAllister's pastor, and the pastor of that family, I would say, you have every right to be blowing smoke out of your ears and ready to shake Tyrone until he became a floppy doll; but God is not giving up on that boy. God loves him even more than you do. God called him to that baptismal font when he was a baby and, through God's help, will help him figure out how to be loving, respectful and live a decent life. It may not come today, or tomorrow. Who knows? It may not come the rest of his life, and perhaps God will have to walk on water into the very depths of hell - which is why I think the Apostles Creed says "into hell" - that God will even walk there, to pull somebody out and bring them into Heaven. But your son, Tyrone, and his 16-year-old buddy are never beyond the grace, the forgiveness and love of the all-powerful and almighty God.

You need to remember that, parents, when your children hurt you, and hurt others. And, if you are the one who has been the stinker and you have guilt that maybe you have never been able to get over, you are not worthless. I think a lot of people in prison made one mistake and they thought they were so unworthy of God, or anyone else, ever forgiving them that they might as well make a hundred more. It is our Good News of the Gospel that we tell them, "You can stop the bad, because God is waiting to embrace you, to forgive you with accountability, and love you forever more."

That is why we continue to pray for young men like Tyrone and his ill-advised friend, and why we can comfort parents whose child, for whatever reason, is struggling, and why we can give a hand up to Mr. Singh Natt, and say, "You are a brother and we are so sorry, and this isn't who my son is - who he shouldn't be - and please help me to not hate him, but figure out how to heal and help him."

That's the Good News of the Gospel. That's why we are here and, in our darkest moments, with ourselves or with our family or friends, that is why forgiveness continues - through the glory and blessing of Jesus Christ. Amen.