

Spirits of Love and Fear

A sermon on 2 Timothy 1:1-14 by Nathan Nettleton, 2 October 2022

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Message

When you know yourself truly beloved by God in Christ, you are freed from fear and shame to live fully and generously and courageously.

Sermon

The prophet and poet [Michael Leunig](#) once wrote:

There are only two feelings.
Love and fear.
There are only two languages.
Love and fear.
There are only two activities.
Love and fear.
There are only two motives,
two procedures, two frameworks,
two results.
Love and fear.
Love and fear.

And in the reading we heard tonight from his second letter to Timothy, the Apostle Paul wrote, “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of love and of power and of self-discipline.”

Some years ago, I saw a singer/songwriter I rather like playing at the Tamworth Country Music Festival. His name is [Pat Drummond](#), and he is a man of faith who inhabits the blurry zone between the folk and country genres, so I had previously seen him a few times at the Port Fairy Folk Festival. Now one of the differences between folk festivals and country festivals is that the political centre of gravity of the audiences tend to be poles apart. If national elections were held at folk festivals, the Greens would be in government, but if they were held at the Tamworth country music festival, the National Party would rule, perhaps in coalition with Pauline Hanson and Clive Palmer.

So when Pat Drummond sings at Port Fairy, it doesn't take any great courage to sing a song that calls on our nation to open its heart and welcome asylum seekers into our communities instead of into our detention centres, but when he sang the same song at Tamworth, my hat was off to his bravery and integrity. “There are only two languages: love and fear.” “For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of love and of power and of self-discipline.”

When the apostle Paul draws this stark contrast between fear and cowardice on the one hand and love and power and self-discipline on the other, he actually throws in another characteristic on the fear and cowardice side: shame. He spoke of not being ashamed a couple of times in the reading we heard. Systems of honour and shame were more fundamental to the culture of Paul's day than they are to contemporary Anglo Australia, but it is still not too difficult for us to make the connection between shame and fear and to see how they cripple our capacity to love as Jesus loves. So much of the fear that holds us back from

loving generously and graciously is the fear of being shamed or humiliated, the fear of being publicly exposed as something embarrassing, contemptible, unlovable and unloved.

One place you can clearly see how this works is in the LGBT+ community. The ideas of “being in the closet” and “coming out of the closet” have a great deal to do with shame and fear. A person lives their life “in the closet” because they are afraid of the shame and rejection that comes with being identified as part of a group that is sometimes still regarded with revulsion and contempt. But although “coming out of the closet” is often only thought of in individual terms – as an individual accepting themselves and living more honestly and openly – it is more than that. It is also about an individual becoming willing to stand in solidarity with others.

In the closet, your silence does nothing to challenge or change the culture of prejudice and hatred. When you come out of the closet, others who are out no longer have to stand alone. So it is not just an act of self-acceptance, but an act of love and solidarity.

And you can see why the concept of “coming out of the closet” has now broadened beyond the LGBT+ community, and we use it whenever we are speaking of someone going public with an unpopular truth about who they are or what they believe after previously keeping it quiet and hidden for fear of being shamed and shunned. I don’t think there was a time when Pat Drummond kept his head down and only sang redneck songs at Tamworth, but if there had been and then one day he came out and began singing his asylum seeker support song, we’d speak of him “coming out of the closet”, not because it was an act of self-acceptance, but because it was an act of courageous love and solidarity in the face of likely hostility.

The other thing this illustration from the LGBT+ community can show us is the way that structures of shame and fear are often blasphemously attributed to God so that God’s name can be used to keep people trapped in fear and self-hatred. This is why the Apostle says, in the same passage that we heard tonight, that God “saved us and called us, ... not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace (which) was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.”

He is emphasising that God’s acceptance of us has got nothing to do with our works, nothing to do with anything we have done or are doing. God’s acceptance of you has got nothing to do with what you do or don’t do in your bedroom, or with what songs you sing at what music festival, or with whether or not you are a good parent, or with whether or not you believe the right doctrine of salvation.

I’m not saying that God doesn’t care about those things. God cares very much about you and about every aspect of your life and wellbeing, but, as Paul wrote, God’s gracious acceptance of us “was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.” Before the ages began. That is before you had ever believed anything or sung anything or gone to bed with anyone. God’s gracious acceptance of you is a given.

God is not on the lookout for reasons to despise you or reject you. There is nothing you have done and nothing you could do that would result in God rejecting you. You could reject God if you wish, but even that will not make God stop loving you and looking upon you with delight and wonder and joy, and holding out yearning arms of gracious welcome and acceptance to you.

That's why it is such a blasphemy that we project these hostile and judgmental structures of shame and moral fear onto God. Jesus described this as tying heavy burdens onto people's backs because of the way it imprisons and cripples people, and the world's religions have got a lot to answer for in this regard.

We have far too often terrified people with visions of an angry condemning God who judges us only by our works and despises us for what we have become. People are told for all sorts of reasons that they are not part of what God created and declared good, but that they are shameful failures and contemptible defects who God regards with disgust.

Far too often the message is that they are only accepted into the church on condition that they despise themselves and remain imprisoned in closets of shame and fear. And thus imprisoned, and thus believing themselves utterly unloved, there is no possible way that people can live in the spirit of love and power and self-discipline that God has graciously given us. "There are only two languages: love and fear."

But Jesus turns all this on its head, and exposes it for the blasphemous and death-dealing lie that it is. As the Apostle Paul put it in our reading, the grace that was given to us before the ages began has now been revealed through the appearing of our saviour, Jesus the messiah, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

In everything he did and said, Jesus exposed this lie and uncovered the life-giving truth – in the ways that he loved and welcomed and liberated those who were locked in shame and self-disgust; in the ways that he courageously opposed the religiously motivated tying of heavy burdens on people's backs; and in the ways that he reinterpreted our scriptures to us to speak so consistently of God's joyous delight in us.

Jesus pulled back the veil of religious lies and misrepresentations to reveal to us the astonishingly free and generous love and mercy of God. He showed us that God's love for us is neither founded on anything good we have done, nor threatened by anything bad we have done. He showed us that we are and were loved before we had done anything at all, good or bad. Indeed we are and were loved before the ages began, and whatever wrong we have done or will do was forgiven before we had even done it, before our very first stumbling failure, before the ages began.

We are loved, deeply and extravagantly, not because of anything we have done or anything we have refrained from doing, but because love and grace are God's fundamental nature. They are who God is and what God does. Indeed they are what makes God God.

Even if you have taken onboard and internalised all that self-condemning crap that religion has dished up, and when you look in the mirror you see yourself only as a disappointment and a shameful mistake, God looks upon you as a most beautiful treasure. God looks upon you and flushes with pleasure and joy. God delights in you. Yes, you. Each and every one of you. God delights in you, in all that you are and in all that you are destined to be.

And so fiercely and tenaciously did Jesus insist on this total overthrow of the religious systems of shame and death that he would not even back down when the religious forces united against him and struck back with deadly force. He held his line graciously and

uncompromisingly, and was killed for preaching and demonstrating God's delight in those who were supposed to be kept captive in shame and fear. There are only two languages – love and fear – and Jesus was only willing to speak one of those languages, even in the face of torture and death.

And in case those hateful religious voices are still ringing in your head and telling you that God cannot delight in you because you are failed and broken and fallen from grace, Jesus rises from the dead and reaches out to us with the wounded hands of unending love. It is clearly not true that God can welcome and accept only that which is unblemished and unbroken, because Jesus himself is now blemished and broken.

The one who was utterly shamed and broken and condemned, strung up naked and rejected and cursed and abandoned to die, is now lifted up and exalted in the highest heaven, still appearing as a lamb who has been slain, still bearing the shameful marks of brokenness and death, and yet overflowing with life and love and grace, for death has been stripped of its power to shame and imprison us. There is nothing and no one that is too scarred or failed or broken to be gathered into his brokenness and raised to new life and love and freedom in his rising from the dead.

So come, let us cast off the burdens of shame and fear and death, and know ourselves utterly and joyously loved. And knowing ourselves so beloved, let us find in Jesus the courage to come out and stand up for all those who the world despises and tries to imprison in closets of fear or behind closed borders of exclusion.

And let us now sing and pray in solidarity with all who still suffer under the weight of the sin and hostility of the world. And let us gather here round our Lord's table, to feed again from the wounded hands of love, and to rekindle the gift of God that is within us, for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of love and power and self-discipline, and here at the table, the table of our Lord, we can taste the first fruits of the world made new and set free to love and be loved in the joyous grace made known in Jesus with power and love.

Thanks be to God!