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Mark 9:30-37

On the Mend: Healing What Ails Us – Healing Pride

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Mark 9:30-37 New Revised Standard Version

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

I don’t know about you, but over the years some of my worst actions and decisions have been motivated by fear.[[1]](#footnote-2) Do you know what I mean? Fear has this way of leading you to misperceive both threats and opportunities. Fear has this way of prompting impulsive and sometimes irrational behavior, and of narrowing your vision so it’s difficult to see possibilities.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Did you know that the chemist and rabies vaccine inventor Louis Pasteur is reported to have had such an irrational fear of dirt and infection he refused to shake hands? And President and Mrs. Benjamin Harrison were so intimidated by the newfangled electricity installed in the White House they didn't dare touch the light switches. If there were no servants around to turn off the lights when the Harrisons went to bed, they slept with the lights on.[[3]](#footnote-4)

There is a story of Johnny who was 5 years old in the kitchen as his mom made supper. His mom asked him to go into the pantry and get her a can of tomato soup, but Johnny didn't want to go in the pantry alone. Johnny said, "It's dark in there and I'm scared." Johnny’s mom asked again, and Johnny again said he was too scared. Finally Johnny’s mom said, "It's okay, Jesus will be in there with you." Johnny walked hesitantly to the door and slowly opened it. He peeked inside, saw it was dark, and started to leave when all at once an idea came, and Johnny said: "Jesus, if you're in there, would you hand me that can of tomato soup?"[[4]](#footnote-5)

In our scripture today Jesus tells his friends for the second time that he is going to die. And his friends respond with fear and that fear manifests itself through arguing about who is better - pride. The disciples respond to uncertainty by talking about their place in God’s kingdom. They are filled with fear, and that fear drives them to look out only for themselves.

We have been arguing about who is the greatest from the beginning of time. Who is loved most by God? Who is God’s favorite? It makes me think of right before a football game when both teams are playing to God that they will be the winner. They can’t both win. Anyone who has a sibling is familiar with this idea of who is loved most. My own two kids often like to ask me who I love the most. Who is my favorite? Luckily I have a boy and a girl so my answer is, you are my favorite girl and you are my favorite boy. But, they are never satisfied with that answer.

There is something about fear and faith and pride that gets all wrapped up together. Remember when the disciples are in the boat with Jesus and there is a great storm? Jesus calms the storm and then he asks, “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” (Mark 4:40). And after Jairus’s daughter dies, Jesus tells Jairus, “Do not fear, only believe.” And Jesus restores her to life.

Jesus seems to be telling us doubt is not the opposite of faith; fear is, or at least that kind of fear that paralyzes, distorts, and drives to despair.[[5]](#footnote-6) What are you afraid of? Now you might think of something silly. I remember when a friend called me to her apartment at 11 pm because there was a cockroach in her bathtub. I will have you know that I went over to my friend Susan’s house and killed and disposed of that cockroach for her. What fears pursue you during the day and haunt you at night?[[6]](#footnote-7) This week Lee, my husband was out of town and I had a fear that I would sleep through my alarm in the morning and everyone would be late, so I set two alarms. But one night I woke up in a cold sweat because I had dreamed that my children had died. All day long I couldn’t shake this feeling of dread because I cannot protect my children at all times. I do not have absolute control over everything in the world, though I would like to think that I do.

What worries weigh you down so that it’s difficult to move forward in faith?[[7]](#footnote-8) I was talking with someone from Greenland Hills this week about their faith and they said after all of the Bible studies and classes and learning, they realized that the only thing that they knew for sure about their faith was what they had learned at Vacation Bible School when they were a young child, “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong, they are weak, but he is strong.” Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me!” There are a lot of variations of “Jesus loves me,” one of my favorite verses says, “Jesus loves me still today, walking with me on my way, wanting as a friend to give light and love to all who live.”

What worries weigh you down so that it’s difficult to move forward in faith?[[8]](#footnote-9) As a pastor, I worry sometimes that there won’t be enough money in the church. Okay, I worry about that a lot. But, I always try to remember the wise words of my first boss, not Jesus, the District Superintendent. His name was Jim Dorff and he told me, “Kerry, the church is a nonprofit, you aren’t supposed to have money in the bank.” But, giving money to the church is an offering to God. It is a way for me to say to God who is first in my life. I am not first. My desire for stuff is not first. God is first. And I am going to tithe so that my gift to God is felt. When I give $20 to the church, I don’t feel it. It doesn’t matter. And my gift to God should matter. It should be big enough that I have to budget around it. So, we give God 10% because I want my check to the church to be the biggest check that I write each month. I want to give God all of me.

What worries weigh you down so that it’s difficult to move forward in faith?[[9]](#footnote-10) As a pastor, I worry that no one will come. I worry that we will open the doors of the sanctuary and no one will want to come and worship God. I worry that we will have trained our Sunday School teachers and no children will want to come to learn about God. And every single time there is an event here at Greenland Hills and I worry that no one will come, Jesus says to me, “It’s okay that we don’t have as many people as that other church. I want you to love the people that come to your doors.” Jesus has to remind me each and every time that I am loved, that I just have to love, I just have to be faithful, I just have to serve. I want my every thought to be how can I help other people? Is someone thirsty? Is someone hungry? Does someone need clothes? Does someone need a visit?

Jesus says, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Our pride of being number one can come at the cost of trampling others. Jesus turns the definition of being “first” upside-down because for Jesus it is by serving others that we are lifted up and made whole. What relief and healing could come to us if we can let go of the need to be right, the need to be first or the need to win.[[10]](#footnote-11)

Are we letting our fear rob us of the abundant life that Jesus came to announce and to share? Fears, such as our fear about being alone, our fear about losing a loved one or a relationship ending, our anxieties about health or employment, our concern for the future of our children or grandchildren, our dread about the return of mental or physical illness, our worry for the environment and the world we will leave behind, dead end us.[[11]](#footnote-12) Fear strips life of joy and makes it very difficult to be wise and faithful stewards of the present moment and resources with which God has entrusted us.[[12]](#footnote-13)

So, how do we respond? What do we do? Be a servant of all. Faith is movement, faith is taking a step forward in spite of doubt and fear.[[13]](#footnote-14) Faith is doing even the smallest thing in the hope and trust of God’s promises.

“Jesus took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’” Abundant life comes not through gathering power but through displaying vulnerability, not through accomplishments but through service, and not by collecting powerful friends but by welcoming children.[[14]](#footnote-15)

Serving others, opening ourselves to the needs of others, being honest about our own needs and fears, showing kindness to a child, welcoming a stranger.[[15]](#footnote-16) And each time we make even the smallest of these gestures in faith, when we find the strength and courage to reach out to another in compassion even when we are afraid, we will find our fear grows smaller and it is replaced by a confidence that fear and death do not have the last word.[[16]](#footnote-17)

The God who once created out of nothing, made light from darkness, and raised Jesus from the dead is still at work, not dispelling all our fears but keeping us from being overwhelmed by them and helping us to move forward in faith.[[17]](#footnote-18) Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-17-b-faith-fear/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-17-b-faith-fear/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Jane Goodsell, Not a Good Word About Anybody, Ballantine. Found here: http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/f/fear.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Charles Allen, Victory in the Valleys. Found here: http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/f/fear.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-17-b-faith-fear/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-17-b-faith-fear/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-17-b-faith-fear/ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-17-b-faith-fear/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-17-b-faith-fear/ [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. From Marcia McFee’s sermon series notes: On the Mend in her worship design studio [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-17-b-faith-fear/ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-17-b-faith-fear/ [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-17-b-faith-fear/ [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-17-b-faith-fear/ [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-17-b-faith-fear/ [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-17-b-faith-fear/ [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-17-b-faith-fear/ [↑](#footnote-ref-18)