

Overcoming Fear

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[0 : 00] Good morning, would you pray with me? Father, we pray that you would open up our hearts and our minds to hear from you.

Would you speak to us now through your word? In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. It's easy to assume that when great or important things happen in the world, they happen because of exceptional people who, by a kind of abundance of talent or sheer force of will, simply make things happen. I remember when I visited Rome years ago, and I went to see the Sistine Chapel where Michelangelo painted these incredible frescoes of the biblical narrative on the ceiling.

And when you look at them, it is easy to think of Michelangelo's accomplishment as this sort of preordained work of genius. But what people often forget is that when the Pope commissioned Michelangelo to paint the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo was not interested.

In fact, he didn't think of himself as a painter. He thought of himself as a sculptor. And he was so overwhelmed at the thought of this task that he fled from Rome to Florence, and it took two years before he actually began to commence the work.

[1 : 28] And that was under the insistence of the Pope. And so the Sistine Chapel only happened because somebody made Michelangelo do it. Or think of Abraham Lincoln.

I was not getting choked up at the thought of Abraham Lincoln there. Many regard Lincoln as the greatest of all American presidents, and it's natural to think that what he accomplished was the result of sheer political talent or this sort of force of vision.

But when historians rate presidents on things like conflict avoidance or people-pleasing, Lincoln is off the charts. He's right there at the very top.

He devoted hours each day to holding office hours with citizens. He pardoned deserters in the Civil War. He agonized for six months over whether he should actually free the slaves before he signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

Or think of Martin Luther King, Jr., who only wanted to be a pastor and eventually a college president but not a civil rights leader.

[2 : 50] But after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat at the front of a bus, an association was formed to launch a bus boycott, and one of the attendees nominated King to be president of that little association.

And King later wrote, It happened so quickly that I didn't have time to think it through. It's probable that if I had, I would have declined the nomination. King described himself as possessed by fear when he had to start giving speeches to the community.

And his most famous speech, his I Have a Dream speech that he delivered in 1963, only occurred because a colleague proposed that Dr. King should be the closing speaker of the March on Washington, and that colleague gathered a coalition of other leaders to advocate on King's behalf. We love to tell stories about heroes, about larger-than-life figures who make an impact on the world because of their talent and their drive, but the reality is that the way that most people impact the world, including those that we look up to the most, is often far more complex.

As Church of the Advent moves closer, we're not there yet, but moves closer to purchasing a building in the center of the city, again, hasn't happened yet, we need to keep praying, the prospect of a permanent church home has many of us thinking about what kind of long-term impact we as a church want to have on the city.

[4 : 33] Last week, I had the chance to drive by the outside of the church that we're hoping to buy. Anybody else done any drive-by viewings? And I found myself looking not just at the building, but looking at everything that surrounds it.

The neighborhood streets that are stacked with row houses, with thousands of people living in them. The charter school across the street that is serving at-risk kids in our city.

Some of the homeless, or what appear to be people who are homeless, sitting on the sidewalks just a few streets away. And standing outside the church, I found myself wondering, how should we be thinking about mission in our city?

As we move, hopefully, into a new neighborhood. Being new kids on the block, but hopefully being there for a long time.

What should be our mindset? And if we believe that impact isn't accomplished simply because talented, driven people show up to make things happen, how does effective mission occur?

[5 : 49] And in particular, how does effective mission occur through the church? And our gospel lesson from this morning's lectionary readings, I think, has much to teach us about that.

We are in Matthew chapter 10 this morning, but I want us to take a moment to think back to our lectionary readings from the past two weeks from Matthew chapter 9.

And we might think about Matthew chapter 9 as something like a Jesus highlight film. The chapter is packed with him, performing one miracle after another, from one scene to the next.

The chapter opens with Jesus healing a paralytic, which is right before he invites Matthew to be one of his disciples. In the next scene, Jesus is being asked to heal a ruler's daughter, but before he can even get to the man's house, another woman touches him along the way, touches the hem of his garment, and he heals her.

And then when Jesus finally gets to the house of the ruler, the daughter has now died, so Jesus brings her back to life. And then in the final two scenes, two blind men approach Jesus, followed by another man with a demon, and he heals them all.

[7 : 01] Now, by the end of Matthew chapter 9, you could just stop the story, mic drop, and Matthew 9 would be an inspirational success story with climactic music at the end.

Jesus on a mission. Jesus impacting the world. But that would not be the full account. Because in nearly every single scene in Matthew 9, Jesus is faced with trouble and difficulty and complaints. He's teaching, he's healing, and you would think that everyone would be happy about it, right? But they're not. So the chapter opens with Jesus healing the paralytic man, and the paralytic man is happy, but the religious officials are not.

And they tell Jesus, would you please stop announcing to people that their sins are forgiven when you heal them? And when Jesus calls Matthew, Matthew's pretty happy, but maybe just a little surprised.

And everyone else is upset that Jesus is overthrowing social conventions to eat with sinners and tax collectors. And when Jesus brings the daughters, the ruler's daughter back to life, the family is filled with gratitude, but everyone else who's gathered there mocks Jesus for his clearly mistaken analysis that she is merely asleep.

[8 : 32] And then when Jesus frees a man from demonic oppression, rather than celebrating with the man, those in power question Jesus' motives and accuse him of using demonic powers to accomplish such deeds.

In other words, Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, going from village to village, doing amazing stuff, in nearly every case, gets decidedly mixed reactions.

People like some parts of his ministry, but not other parts. Some want the miracle, but not the teaching. Others want the healing, but not on this day, or in that way, or for that person.

Jesus brings a holistic mission in both word and deed, and it is never, never a slam dunk success. Jesus' mission is always embedded in difficulty, misunderstanding, and resistance. And now, in our passage from this morning's reading in Matthew 10, Jesus warns his disciples that their ministry is going to get exactly the same reaction as his ministry.

[9 : 51] He's commissioned them to do what he's been doing, teaching and preaching the kingdom of God, healing the sick, casting out demons, and then after commissioning them, he says in Matthew 10, verse 16, Behold, I'm sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake. And then in verse 24, he goes on to say, A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.

If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, which is what the Jews refer to as Satan, how much more will they malign those of his household?

I want to take seriously what Jesus is saying here, that kingdom ministry always occurs in the midst of resistance and difficulty, and that what Jesus faced in his ministry will be faced by those who follow him.

And I want us to reflect for a moment on what it might mean for us and for our mission as a church. And I'd like for us to notice two things. First, our human tendency is to want to approach mission from a position of strength and effectiveness.

[11:27] We spend most of our working lives oriented around competency and success. But Jesus seems to assume that when it comes to kingdom mission, not only is it going to be marked by difficulty rather than immediate outward success, but also that true effectiveness will come from a power that is beyond our own abilities.

Jesus tells his disciples, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. To be a sheep is to be in a position of powerlessness, not conquest.

As Woody Allen once said, the lion may lie down with the lamb, but the lamb won't get much sleep. Jesus says his followers will be delivered over to courts and dragged before governors.

Now that may literally happen in some places or in some eras. It certainly did for the disciples and in the early church, and it happens in other parts of the world today. But the reality is that in any era and in all places, we can be assured that kingdom mission will come into conflict with systems of power that oppose that mission.

Not too long ago, I was sitting down with the executive director of one of the largest faith-based affordable housing organizations here in Washington, D.C. and he was describing to me their newest efforts to provide affordable housing specifically for returning citizens.

[13:05] People have been released from prison and are now returning home to the district, often after years of being away. One of the leading predictors of whether or not returning citizens will be able to rebuild their life or will re-offend and return to prison is whether or not they can find a place to live.

And often, they have burned so many bridges, he told me, that they no longer have family or friends to stay with and they need a place to call home. But he described to me the powerful interests, the economic forces, the real estate development objectives that must be overcome to create such housing.

Now, these powerful barriers were not erected by people with evil intentions or by people who don't want returning citizens to have affordable housing.

And it's not to say that economics and real estate interests don't matter. It's simply to say that such barriers reflect something that the Apostle Paul calls in Ephesians principalities and powers.

Nameless, faceless systems take on a life of their own, and even if it wasn't originally intended, they act as barriers to human flourishing. And it can feel overwhelming to come up against these forces, making you simply want to give up or not even try.

[14:36] Systems, by their very nature, encourage passivity. How do we resist them?

Not from a posture of conquest, Jesus says. We should, of course, be wise as servants, Jesus allows. We should be smart and thoughtful and strategic.

But Jesus is also clear that overcoming such systems will not ultimately be the result of our own competence. Instead, Jesus says in verse 19, when you are standing before those in power and seemingly at your weakest, it is at that moment that what you are to say will be given to you.

The spirit of your father speaking through you. Have you ever had an experience when you were given something that was beyond you?

Perhaps it was the right words at just the right moment. Perhaps it was kindness that was beyond yourself in the face of mistreatment.

[16:10] Perhaps it was strength to bear something farther than you could bear on your own. Being given something from the outside is what life in the kingdom is about.

That something from the outside inside, that power is available to us. And our lives over time should increasingly be marked by an expectation of and a reliance on that power.

as we consider the prospect of moving into a new neighborhood, a new era as a church, we should remember that authentic ministry is never a conquering crusade.

If Jesus' ministry and the experience of the early church is any guide, authentic mission will almost always be marked by difficulty. In his commentary on Matthew chapter 10, the New Testament scholar Dale Bruner writes that it is almost as though Jesus expects saving mission to occur more often through bad things than through good.

Why is that? perhaps in part because in the life of the church and in our own personal lives, difficulty and trouble create pathways to reliance on the Lord.

[17 : 57] It is primarily through difficulty that we learn that our strength, our power, our competency is inadequate. It is through trials that we learn humility.

There are some mountains that we just cannot climb. And as we begin to experience the Lord providing what we need, those experiences become part of our witness.

The Lord did this, not me, not us. So the first thing to notice in Jesus' teaching on mission is that it almost always occurs in the midst of difficulty and any lasting success will be the result of God's power and not our competency.

The second thing I'd like us to notice briefly, however, is the greatest barrier to living out our mission and that barrier is fear.

We instinctively fear difficulty. In fact, sometimes the fear of potential difficulty is even worse than the experience of difficulty itself. Our human nature is wired to seek safety and protection and comfort and to avoid at any cost the prospect of pain or trouble.

[19 : 29] And thus, fear may act as a barrier to mission, especially if we've just heard Jesus himself promise that mission is going to be accompanied by pain and trouble. That fear may show up in different ways.

We might fear that the comfort and predictability of our lives might be disrupted by certain forms of ministry. We might fear getting overwhelmed by taking on problems that we know little about. We might fear the personal journey that we would need to go on in order to live out some of the things that God has put in our hearts and the changes that might require.

There's a psychologist named Julie Norum who has studied strategies for handling fear in different scenarios. One strategy she calls strategic optimism.

Strategic optimists look at something fearful and they do their best to ignore the bad things that might happen and instead focus their attention on best case scenarios.

[20 : 38] But another approach she describes is what we might call strategic pessimism. Strategic pessimists imagine certain scenarios and then they purposefully consider the worst that might happen.

When they have to give a speech they imagine themselves not only doing a poor job giving the speech but tripping on the stage and then forgetting all their lines. Now most people assume it's better to be a strategic optimist.

But in fact her studies show that if approached in the right way strategic pessimism can sometimes result in better outcomes. Because when fear begins to creep in rather than denying what we fear or pretending it's not there or looking away only at best case scenarios one way to diminish its power is to lean into the fear to sit with it and to consider the other side of even the worst happening.

And I wonder when he begins addressing his disciples fear as they head out into mission. If Jesus might be employing a bit of strategic pessimism.

He says to his disciples when you go out to do kingdom ministry you're going to run into trouble just expected. But he doesn't stop there. Rather than offer false encouragement he goes on to say in verse 28 and you don't even need to fear those who are going to kill you.

[22 : 17] There is nothing to suggest that the disciples had up until that moment even been considering that possibility. And so perhaps it raised new questions in their mind that they didn't have moments before.

But now having presented the very worst case scenario having leaned fully into the ultimate fear of every person including his disciples that my very life might be at risk.

Jesus is ready to provide a different way of thinking. He says you don't need to fear because God your heavenly father is actively and personally caring for you.

Even the very hairs on your head are numbered. He says in verse 29 not even a sparrow can fall to the ground apart from your father.

One of the biggest lies that we believe and what ultimately leads us to live in fear is the belief that not only does God not notice sparrows, God is not watching out for me.

[23 : 34] God doesn't have my best interests at heart. And if I am going to be safe and happy in this world it is up to me to make that happen.

And we live in fear of anything that might threaten those efforts. And on one level this is entirely rational because the world on its own is not a safe place.

Jesus says that people in power brother may harm us. He says that even family members may betray us. Brother will deliver brother over to death.

He says even those who are close to us might hurt us. But what Jesus is teaching here and one of the most radical things that we can learn is that even amidst the very worst things in the world we are not outside of God's care.

A sparrow cannot fall to the ground Jesus says apart from the Father. The hard but ultimately comforting truth is that there is nothing that happens in this life that is outside of God's providential care.

[25 : 04] this does not mean that God is somehow behind the bad things that happen to us that come as the result of living in a fallen world.

But the mystery of God's providence is that he is able to take anything that happens in our lives and use it for our good and for his good purposes.

we are safe with God. And the more deeply that we are able to take that in the more possible it is for us to live free of the fear that drives us to arrange our lives in ways that are apart from God.

And the more freedom we will find to live our lives as on a mission. And thus we might ask ourselves as a church as we think about our mission in this city if we were to trust God's power and not our own competence if we were to accept the difficulty and troubles that are the norm and if we were to increasingly live free from fear what does God want to do through Church of the Advent?

And we might ask the same question of ourselves personally. How might I allow the difficulties the barriers the mountains in my life that I cannot climb to lead me into greater reliance on the Lord?

[26 : 41] how might I lean into my fears and welcome God's care? And how might I follow Jesus into the world more fully relying on the power of the Holy Spirit?

Amen.