

**3 Pentecost**  
**June 21, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

I want to begin with a story I may have used before. It is a story that Caren has in her book, *Healing Words*.

Caren and I were married on September 1, 1990. I was the new Rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Toledo, Ohio ... and Caren was very new to the culture of the Episcopal Church. Later in that fall of 1990 the regional Episcopal Church Women ... ECW ... had a luncheon with the bishop in attendance and, of course, they invited the new wife of the new rector to join them.

Caren sat at a table with women from several different churches in the area, and the conversation turned to flower arranging and the florists they chose to supply the flowers. One of the women mentioned that their church used Epstein's Florist, then a woman from another church said, "We don't use them. They are Jewish, and you know how THEY are!"

The way Caren tells the story she felt like she had been punched in the stomach ... it took her breath away. These women did not know Caren was Jewish. By the mere comment she had been marginalized because of her faith upbringing. Then she faced the dilemma, do I say something or not? They don't know me. It would be rather awkward and possibly embarrassing. If she said something how might that reflect upon Ted ... the new Rector of St. Mark's.

I imagine that many of us have been in similar situations. Someone tells a racist joke, or makes a gay-bashing comment, or uses some inappropriate sexual innuendo. If we are silent we passively condone the remarks. And if we say something we risk embarrassment, awkwardness, possible even defensive anger ... certainly risking being marginalized or ignored altogether.

Caren, risking all, just said politely, "I am Jewish." There was a long awkward silence at the table. Then the woman who had made the comment said, "I am so sorry," and got up and left. At that point the program began and the chair of the regional ECW began her remarks from the podium. When the meeting was over others apologized for the offensive woman and expressed regret about the incident.

Fear has an immense power to steal life from us. However, there comes a time in every life when we have the opportunity to break free from that fear ... even if the cost is high ... even if it means the risk of losing life ... losing one's physical life, or losing life in a relationship, a community, or a culture.

This morning's reading from Matthew's gospel ends with the statement ... being made by Jesus to his disciples,

*"Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."*

There is much more in the reading ... In this time of civil unrest around racism and white-privilege ... as statues of slave-owners are being torn down across the South ... we hear a reminder that there were "slaves" in the time of Jesus. In a time of fake news, false "truths," and outright lies, we hear that there is "nothing secret that will not become known." In a time of deathly violence against black people, we hear the words about "kill[ing] the body." In this time of divisiveness in our country, we hear of a family where everyone seems to be mad at everyone else. (The family sounds like what might happen if they had a reunion just before the Presidential Election.) In this time of protests, Jesus tells his disciples, "I have come not to bring peace, but a sword." Then we hear

*"Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."*

There is a lot in this story, along with the reading from Jeremiah and the Letter to the Christians in Rome. Yet, in the middle of this reading from Matthew's gospel are the words, *"So have no fear ..."* and *"so do not fear ..."* and *"so do not be afraid."* Are they words of comfort, or words of challenge ... or both?

In this time of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic ... when over 8.5 million people around the world have been diagnosed with the disease ... 2.3 million in this country alone ... and almost half a million have died across the globe, and over 120,000 deaths in the United States as the number of new cases is rising every day, it seems like the subject of death surrounds us. And, I'm not just talking about the kind of death that comes when the blood stops flowing through our bodies, but rather the kind of death ... existential death ... that robs of us of life because of fear. This kind of death ... and our fear of it ... has an immense power in our lives.

Here is the premise of this sermon: Fear has an enormous power to steal life from us. Whenever we live with even the slightest fear we are not living into the fullness of the life God gave us. God has blessed each and every one of us ... and living that blessing is the antidote to that fear. However, living that blessing can be a comfort on the one hand, and a challenge on the other. Jesus lived that kind of life ... and it led him to the cross. Yet, even in his death he was living life to the fullest.

When people are ignored, discounted, marginalized, disregarded, snubbed, banished, or ostracized it can feel as if they are not alive ... at least to the person or institution on the other end of the transaction. This is existential death. I imagine most of you know situations in your own life where someone just looked over you as if you weren't there, and it feels as if they are not even acknowledging that you are alive, much less have worth. That is the power of existential death, and I believe it robs us of living life to its fullest.

I heard an interview with a woman frustrated with her attempts at getting unemployment benefits here in Florida. She said, "I feel like I don't exist ... I don't exist in the unemployment system, and sometimes it feels like I don't really exist in this world,"

What happens when we fear that we are not seen, or not heard, or not respected, or not acknowledged? I believe that it is that fear that steals away life from us. What if we are not included? What if we are not recognized for what we have done, or for the title we have earned, for the position we hold? What happens when we have a truth to tell, but no one will listen ... at least no one who can do something about it. What happens when we are not recognized as being someone ... as if we never existed.

We all experience existential death. It happens to us when we are ignored, left out, chosen last, overlooked, or bullied. It happens to whole classes and cultures when they are denigrated because of their religion, or their sexual orientation, or their political ideology, or the color of their skin.

Three years ago was the first Women's March in Washington. Women, who felt they had and have something to say ... and have felt ignored by the current political system ... gathered to empower each other to speak up in the face of a culture that all too often dismissed them. Then came the #METOO movement of women who had been sexually assaulted and/or harassed speaking their truth to the power of the men who had perpetrated these acts against them. In 2018, after another school shooting where 17 persons were killed, the students form an advocacy group called "Never Again" and used the hashtag #ENOUGHISENOUGH.

Now, after a history four centuries of oppression of blacks in this country, we are faced with the reality of a white policeman kneeling on the neck of a black man until his life was suffocated out of him. This one very visible act is an obvious symbol of a white culture kneeling on the necks of black people too long. It is not just about physical death ... it is also about the existential death dealt out to every black person by a racist culture. Black Lives Matter!

Fear has an immense power to steal life from us. I'm not just talking about the fear that blacks live with every day. I'm talking about the fear that sometimes keeps us ... us of white privilege ... from doing anything about the systemic racism that our blacks brothers and sisters live with. However, there comes a time in every life when we have the opportunity to break free from that fear ... even if the cost is high ... even if it means the risk of losing life. Whether it is a woman who wants to be paid an equal wage, or one who has lived with a powerful secret about a sexual assault that affects heart and soul, or students who want to live without the threat of horrific violence in their lives, or blacks living in a racist social environment, that moment has come. Black Live Matter. The challenge being given us is to leverage our power and white privilege out of existence.

We have to remember though ... the powers-that-be in every institution will always try to ostracize and silence those that want to disrupt the system as it is ... it is a way to kill the movement by wielding the power of existential death.

We all want to be alive and recognized by others as being alive. Whether it is the women of our society who have been overlooked and sidelined who march together, or those who have the courage to speak up against men who have used them as sexual objects, or students asking for adults to act like adults, or an individual standing up to a racist, or xenophobic, or homophobic comment, I believe that it is our fear of not being acknowledged that has such an immense power in our lives. Fear of being ostracized or marginalized is what keeps us from speaking out. Wanting to fit in is what keeps us conforming to the social norms even when we know that they are wrong. And finally speaking one's truth is a recognition and acknowledgement of being alive.

Status, wealth, position, title, image, and material possessions ... they are all ways to be recognized, included and therefore to be acknowledge as being alive. But, what if we were to leverage our white privilege to make a difference for the benefit of others? What if we were able to live without the fear of being on the outside ... of not being ignored ... of being of value no matter what others thinks?

The fact is, that is exactly what God is telling us. *"So, have no fear ..."* Jesus says to his disciples. *"<sup>8</sup>Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul ... he proclaims. "So do not be afraid ..."* This is the way that Jesus lived his life. He did so by word and example. And he did so without concern for whether the religious establishment or the Roman government liked it. He spoke truth to the power of the institutions around him without fear of death ... not existential death, and not physical death.

If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously then we will live our lives knowing that the fullness of life comes when we put away our fears. Not only do we exist in the eyes of God, but we are all blessed children of God. Regardless of the way we may become marginalized or ostracized by society in general, or by our friends, family, and even the ones who we love the most, we will always be loved by God. And it is that love that allows us to speak when it is awkward, uncomfortable, perhaps even somewhat disturbing.

Sometimes we just have to "hate" or "lose" our life in this world ... we have to risk existential death by those around us ... to know the fullness of life. If we love this life too much ... so much that we will sell-out our God-given blessedness just so we can be included ... we will lose the very life we are seeking. And, if we live in the fear of being ignored, or marginalized, or excluded then life is stolen from us ... the very life God gave us and called us to be its stewards.

Fear has an immense power to steal life from us. Whenever we live with even the slightest fear we are not living into the fullness of the life God gave us. God has blessed each and every one of us and God's love is the antidote to that fear. Jesus lived that kind of life ... and it led him to the cross. But even in his death he was living life to the fullest.

Black Lives Matter! We can be silent no longer. As Jesus implored his disciples, “*So have not fear ...*” Those words are both a comfort and a challenge.

Amen.