

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Luke 9:24-25
2018

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Psalm 139:5:7-10

Unafraid: Friendless and Alone?

One of my favorite stories in the Bible is the one about Moses being called by God. A few weeks back we discussed the story about the Israelites just outside the promised land, but 42 years earlier Moses lived in the Sinai and was tending to sheep. He had fled Egypt after killing an Egyptian task master, fleeing for his life. Moses had found a calm peaceful life.

Then God shows up, burning bush and all, and says, “Moses you will set my people free.” Moses 4 times tries to find an excuse to reject God’s call. Always leaning on the fact that he wasn't good enough, he couldn't speak well enough, or didn't have the right skills.

Moses never says, “God I just want to stay here because I like being here.” Instead every reason he gives or reluctance he has, is because he doesn't feel like he will be enough, Moses seems to fear failing in his duties, even though God keeps saying, “Moses you will...”

Moses avoids so dramatically, that at one point it even says God is considering killing Moses for being so avoidant. I know I have felt this way when asking someone to do something they will excel at, but they keep saying, “Me? Really me?” Especially when they are clearly the person for the work at hand.

This Sunday we continue our series on living Unafraid as Christians by studying the fears of failure, insignificance, disappointing others and being alone. All fears rooted deeply in the feelings of disconnection and

of us having to figure life out without any support from outside ourselves.

We live in a culture full of messages of “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps.” A culture that values the person who is a “self-made” man or woman. Yet even in scripture we are reminded that no one finds success, especially in God’s eyes, all by themselves.

There are two creation stories in Genesis. The first one has God create different parts of creation on different days, at the end of each day of work God sees things are good. As we start into the second story of creation, the one where God makes the better version of human, human 2.0 we should call her. Prior to this God notices something isn’t good for the first time. Man is alone. Now this scripture is a little about marriage, but it mostly about our human need for companionship. The ancient people who told the Genesis story, until it was recorded, clearly understood that something God knew was not good, was a lack of companionship or support for humans. We need people to work alongside, to support us. Not just marriage partners, but partners in the many challenges of life we all face.

In modern understandings of psychology and sociology, Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs is often used to help us understand what humans must have to live full lives, if the bottom pieces are missing the upper pieces of life don’t work. On the bottom of this pyramid is physiologic needs like food, water, rest, shelter. These are the vital necessities for all life as we know it on earth. The next level of the pyramid is safety shelter is part of this, but this is also protection from predators. That fear of the other we talked about last week, we have to feel like we can live without threat of life. Just above that on the pyramid is love and belonging. These come before esteem and self-actualization that top the pyramid. Before we become independent selves, we have to have love and belonging and it comes right after basic needs and safety.

The psychology behind belonging is fascinating too. Our brains early on are programmed to desire the primary chemical of love and belonging, oxytocin. Oxytocin is the primary chemical released in the brain when an infant is breastfeeding. We also see this chemical released when people find connection and belonging later in life. Additionally we have physical structures in our brains called “mirror neurons.” Neurons many of us know are the structures in our brain that send a physical electrical/hormonal signal to make our body do different physical actions. Mirror neurons on the other hand fire a signal when they recognize the action someone else is doing.¹

Let me give you an example. I can wave my hands around in a random pattern. At this point your mirror neurons are not firing. I can then move my hand in a direction that is familiar to you, at that point you might be firing, but most likely not. If I do an action that is familiar notice your response, like when I drink this water. You may have noticed a tinge of thirst or remember what the motion was like.² These are mirror neurons at work.

I saw an experiment online where they had a person put their physical arm on one side of a cardboard box, so they could not see their real arm. Then in front of them they placed a fake arm and touched the fingers with feathers. After a short time the brain started to associate the fake arm with touch and the subjects report feeling the feathers on the hand they cannot, now there are serious videos of this online, but then in this one I saw them stab the fake arm with a fork and the subject jumped back.

Mirror neurons are what allowed us as humans to develop skills for civilization so quickly. It is what allowed us to watch our parents building fires and replicate that, to witness people growing crops and

¹ <http://www.apa.org/monitor/oct05/mirror.aspx>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tq1-ZxV9Dc4>

learn from their actions.³ We are wired quite literally to empathize and to be connected to thrive, and this is what I believe the creators of Genesis were trying to communicate to us.

No wonder there is such a human fear of being isolated or rejected, a fear of failing, and especially fears of not belonging. It is built in to us, this need to belong and have a purpose in our community.

This last week I posted on Facebook a request for my friends to share their deepest fears. Let me first say, we could do an entire sermon with people coming up to the microphone and simply stating their fears, and us holding them in prayer. While many fears were about death and dying, one that stuck out consistently was dying before helping children grow. It was a concern at failing to help our children flourish, and for many a fear of dying on our kids and leaving them.

Failure is a real fear for people, because sometime failing means rejection by the people who we perceive as important to love and belonging. I say “perceive” because many times those involved in making decisions about success in our modern world, are not the ones actually offering us love and belonging.

J.K. Rowling, whose Harry Potter books have sold over 4 million copies, had her manuscript rejected 12 times before one publishing house paid her less than \$3,000 for an advance and was told not to quit her “day job.” In 2008, she the Harvard commencement speech and said, “What I feared most for myself at your age was not poverty, but failure.” She described her failure, which involved rejection from divorce and jobs, struggling to be a single mother raising a daughter. Rowling says, “It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well have not lived at all – in which case, you fail by default.”⁴

³ https://www.ted.com/talks/vs_ramachandran_the_neurons_that_shaped_civilization

⁴ Hamilton, A. (2018). *Unafraid Living With Courage and Hope*. Abingdon Pr. Pg 87-88

Fear of failure is a huge challenge in the church too. Adam Hamilton who writes this series is the leader of Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas part of the Kansas City metro area. When Adam took over the church it worshiped a handful of people. One pastor he talked to told him that he should reject the appointment and go find another church. Being told by the same person that this church was not worth the trouble. Church of the Resurrection now worships in 4 locations and has created a place of transformation for thousands of people on a Sunday. Adam admits that many times though, he almost turned away for fear of being rejected in his career and receiving a “black mark” on his vocational record.

One colleague who saw my Facebook post contacted me and shared, “My mother passed away 10 years ago from cancer. My fear is leaving my kids behind when I am not ready to go, dying youngish like she did.” This fear is not just of death, but of failing our children as a parent in some way and a fear of leaving them lonely as many others fear too.

The other post which is always a striking one to me is loneliness. This comes at different ages in different ways, for some it is isolation due to the potential of Alzheimer’s and dementia and for others it is due to rejection for one reason or another. In an information age we would think connection and love and belonging might be increasing, but as many of us suspect from rising rates of suicide and depression, it is not decreasing. A study of young people born between 1995 and 2012 found that the number of teens who get together for interaction has gone down nearly 40% every day. This is odd sounding for a generation who has smartphones meant to connect, but they aren’t connecting they are isolating people.

Additionally, our American culture is more mobile than it has ever been. Americans will on average move 11.4 times in their lifetime and millennials are being told they need to move every 3 years to progress in their fields. Think about this for a minute, when we used to grow up in one community we would have a consistent body of support. Now each

time you move jobs and locations you are re-networking and needing to find new support structures. Additionally for older people I just saw a study that instead of just working on 401k work, they should be developing relationships. That healthy relationships and a variety of them are actually more important to healthy aging than almost anything else. These relationships are the things helping overcome depression, and even the effects of dementia.

Luke 9:23-25 Common English Bible (CEB)

²³ Jesus said to everyone, "All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me. ²⁴ All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will save them. ²⁵ What advantage do people have if they gain the whole world for themselves yet perish or lose their lives?"

This scripture of Jesus reminding us that alone and successful, will gain us nothing is nestled between two stories:

The first is the feeding of the five thousand in which the disciples come to Jesus around supper time and say, "We gotta send this crowd home, or they are going to get hungry and angry, like a church potluck when the fried chicken runs out." Jesus looks at them, laughs and then reminds them that fear of failing people and rejection can be overcome by love and belonging. In the story version in John Jesus has them find a small boy with a few loaves and fish in his pack. I love the image of the grown disciples coming to a child and asking to borrow his lunch. Then miraculously there is enough food after they bless and share it with all. The food could have multiplied, Jesus was surely capable, but one of my favorite understandings is that people began to share what they were hiding in their bags and baskets.

The story on the other side of our scripture of Luke is of a few disciples climbing to the top of a holy mountain with Jesus. Once on top they see an appearance of Moses, Elijah and along with Jesus they are all there. Peter wants to impress and belong by building shrines for the three of them. Instead the moment comes and goes, reminding the disciples they

need do nothing, but show up and God will be with them. They need not bring the perfect supplies or be perfect, but that they would still have an incredible experience of God and belonging to God. All they should do is listen to the words of Jesus.

And between these two stories Jesus says something that is confirmed by brain science, you belong to God and to one another and that is all that matters in this world. Do not think your accomplishments will make you feel more connected or less fearful. Trusting in God's love will help you live Unafraid.

And trusting in God's love is what we call Grace, the same Grace found in our Psalm today:

Lord, you have examined me.

You know me.

²You know when I sit down and when I stand up.

Even from far away, you comprehend my plans.

³You study my traveling and resting.

You are thoroughly familiar with all my ways.

⁴There isn't a word on my tongue, Lord,

that you don't already know completely.

⁵You surround me—front and back.

You put your hand on me.

⁶That kind of knowledge is too much for me;

it's so high above me that I can't fathom it.

⁷Where could I go to get away from your spirit?

Where could I go to escape your presence?

⁸If I went up to heaven, you would be there.

If I went down to the grave, you would be there too!

⁹If I could fly on the wings of dawn,

stopping to rest only on the far side of the ocean—

¹⁰ even there your hand would guide me;

even there your strong hand would hold me tight!

¹¹If I said, "The darkness will definitely hide me;

the light will become night around me,”
¹² even then the darkness isn't too dark for you!
Nighttime would shine bright as day,
because darkness is the same as light to you!
¹³ You are the one who created my innermost parts;
you knit me together while I was still in my mother's womb.
¹⁴ I give thanks to you that I was marvelously set apart.
Your works are wonderful—I know that very well.
¹⁵ My bones weren't hidden from you
when I was being put together in a secret place,
when I was being woven together in the deep parts of the earth.
¹⁶ Your eyes saw my embryo,
and on your scroll every day was written that was being formed for me,
before any one of them had yet happened.
¹⁷ God, your plans are incomprehensible to me!
Their total number is countless!
¹⁸ If I tried to count them—they outnumber grains of sand!
If I came to the very end—I'd still be with you.

Examine me, God! Look at my heart!
Put me to the test! Know my anxious thoughts!
²⁴ Look to see if there is any idolatrous way in me,
then lead me on the eternal path!

I have two daughters, and I love them no matter who they are.
Whether they succeed or fail, when they feel rejected and alone.
I love them.

Jesus used this same love to describe how our God loves us. A God who found patience with Moses, gave us mirror neurons to help us learn and belong, and a God who called us to follow the teachings of Jesus.

Friends as you go out this week, I invite you to consider that if these fears of lacking love and belonging are so high in our culture, perhaps

we as a church can overcome our own fear that we are somehow irrelevant and remember that our only job as Christians, a role that benefits God, us and everyone else, is to offer community for love and belonging.

Go and do likewise my friends, Shalom and Amen.