

Old Testament: Psalm 118: 1 - 9  
New Testament: Matthew 5: 3 - 12

And now Lord God may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be pleasing and acceptable in Thy sight our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, touched an exposed raw nerve in her sermon during the presidential inauguration.

"Millions have put their trust in you. And as you told the nation yesterday, you have felt the providential hand of a loving God. In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now ... who fear for their lives."

As I am committed to a 2025 preaching theme of "Fear Not Beloved Child" and my colleague in ministry is telling those in power that people are scared and afraid instead of telling the scared people to fear not it gave me pause to reflect upon the very question posed in this sermon title: when is fear appropriate? If we play in the fields of black and white, of either/or, then either I am right and Rev. Budde is wrong and vice versa. But if we play in the fields of gray, of both/and, then Rev. Budde and I could both be speaking to the reality of the human experience within the context of a loving God. And y'all know how I love to play in the shades of gray and love the concept of both/and.

We are also sharing communion today. Communion, by its very nature and purpose of connecting or unifying with God and with one another, facilitates the casting out of fear. Communion is the very reason that John can write "there is no fear in love; perfect love casts out fear". We will cling to that as we partake this morning. Millions of the scared and fearful people that Rev. Budde was referring to will also be partaking of communion this morning. They too will cling to the truth of perfect love casting out fear and yet, will remain scared and afraid. Which again draws me back to the very title of this sermon "when is fear appropriate"?

So here's my thinking on this question. Logically if there is no fear in love and perfect love casts out fear, then it would follow that there is the possibility of fear in anything that is not love. This would then make fear *not* a God problem, neither the feeling of fear nor the cause of fear, because God is love, but a human problem. If God is love, then, according to John, God is incapable of doing anything that would incite fear. Now that doesn't mean the people cannot incite fear *in the name of God* but that is a human problem, a Church problem that is blasphemy against God, a violation of the third commandment to not take God's name in vain. So then, if fear is plausible in

anything *besides* love and has nothing to do with God, then fear is appropriate where there is no love. We have answered the question of the sermon in the abstract; when is fear appropriate? When there is no love. But we are called to move beyond the abstract into action which then leads us to determine what is, and is not, loving. What does love look like in which, according to John, there is no fear?

If God is love and there is no fear in love, then we can determine what love looks like by recognizing when we are with God. Or more appropriately, when God is with us. Lucky for us, Jesus very clearly lays out for us when God is with us in his Sermon on the Mount.

The “poor in Spirit” refers to humility. Humility is also what enables repentance which then leads to repair. There is no fear where there is humility which then means that the inverse is true. Fear is appropriate where there is no humility.

“Those who mourn” refers to those who have lost something or someone. We mourn because the something that we lost was our sense of self, or our independence, or trust, or dignity, or respect. We mourn because there was affection present between ourselves and that someone. Some people do not mourn. Some people tell us it is inappropriate to mourn or even forbidden. But God, love, is with the mourning. Fear is appropriate where there is no mourning.

Meekness has to do with gentleness. Jesus practices gentleness in his invitation to “let the little children come to me and do not hinder them”. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the earth. Gentleness is inviting. Gentleness heals the blind, the mute, and the lame. Gentleness heals leprosy. Gentleness restores the bleeding woman to society. Fear is appropriate where there is no gentleness.

Hungering and thirsting for righteousness has to do with the pursuit of the kind of justice God advocates; not the kind of justice that broken humanity advocates. Righteousness has to do with justice that restores brokenness instead of perpetuating it. Righteousness has to do with the struggle to find ways for all people to be united at the Lord’s table to which he invites us. Fear is appropriate where there is no restoration; where there is no invitation.

Mercy is mercy. It is grounded in humility. Mercy is the capacity to recognize our own need and to recognize that God has met that need. As our need has been met, mercy is then the capacity to recognize needs in others and to, at the very least, attempt to meet those needs. Fear is appropriate where there is no mercy.

To be pure in heart is to seek God first. To be pure in heart is to have God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as our north star. To be pure in heart is to seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness, as previously discussed. This most frequently manifests itself in having no ulterior motives. To be pure in heart is to be genuine, authentic, and to have integrity. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Fear is appropriate where there is no authenticity, no integrity.

To be a peacemaker is to pursue wholeness, completeness, and unity. Peace is not the absence of conflict. Peace is shalom and shalom is wholeness, completeness, and unity. Fear is appropriate where there is no shalom.

And here's the kicker that's great for Rev. Budde. Love is God being with us when we hold people accountable for their own failure to love. God is with us when we suffer the slings and arrows of the people who disagree with the justice and righteousness of God. God is with us when we speak truth to power that is destroying justice and unity and instead perpetuating continued strife, grievance, and separation. There is no fear in accountability.

There are times when fear is appropriate. There are moments in history when fear is appropriate. My own ancestors lived in times where there was no humility; no mourning; no gentleness; no restoration; no invitation; no mercy; no authenticity, no integrity; no shalom. So not only am I not interested in fear and those things that accompany it because of my faith in God who is love, I am not interested in fear because of the personal impact. We can do better. We *must* do better. Amen.