

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario

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How to be happy!

"Happy those whose crimes are forgiven, whose failures are blotted out. happy the person whom God considers to be perfect because of their faith."

Rory McQuaid had a problem. In fact, he had had the problem for so long that it was beginning to worry him to death. Finally, he decided to do something about it and went to see Dr. Wilkie his local psychiatrist. "Doctor, have I got a problem," said Rory. "Every night, when I get into my bed, I think there's a crazy person under it ready to do me some serious harm. I can't get to sleep because I am so afraid. Can you help me?" "Don't worry, Rory," said Dr. Wilkie. "I can cure you of your fears, but it will not happen overnight." "So how long will it take, doctor?" asked Rory. "Well," replied Dr. Wilkie, "come to me twice a week for 3 months and I'll rid you of your phobia." Rory, being a Scot, said "And how much do you charge a session, doctor?" "My charges are \$250 dollars per session," replied Dr. Wilkie. "Well," said Rory "I'm going to have to think about it and let you know. I can't easily afford that kind of money."

Many months later, Rory met Dr. Wilkie in the supermarket. "So why didn't you decide to let me cure you of your fears?" asked Dr. Wilkie. "Well," replied Rory, "As I told you then, your fees were really too high for me. And then I went to my former minister, Andrew Reid and he gave me the cure for free. "So how, may I ask, did your minister cure you?" asked Dr. Wilkie. "Easy," replied Rory He said to me "Why don't you cut the legs off your bed? That way nobody can get under it."

When I was in Sacramento California I arrived shortly before 9/11. All hell literally broke loose when the Twin Towers fell. It was as if someone had released a crate full of fear into the community. Someone from my congregation phoned me up and said, "Turn the television on!" and hung up. What I saw was very hard to believe. I had a friend from my congregation in Stratford who worked in the Twin Towers. That morning he slept through his alarm which saved his life. He arrived late to see the towers enveloped in smoke.

Afterwards I immediately became involved with the Muslims and Sikhs and the Jews in Sacramento. Fear was everywhere. There were attacks on mosques, 2 Sikhs were killed in a hate crime as they went for their morning walk. Things were not good. So, the Interfaith community decided to do everything we could to educate and participate across the faiths to bring about tolerance and understanding.

One of the events we planned was something called the *Children of Abraham*. We had 4 panelists, a Rabbi, a Muslim Imam, A Catholic Priest and a Protestant Minister. We discussed the story of Abraham and Isaac. The Muslims believe that the Isaac in the story was actually Ishmael, so it was an interesting, cordial evening, with much laughter and good feelings as we all learned together what the others believed.

The basis of the coming together was that Abraham was a father to Muslims and Jews and the spiritual father of Christians. There was unity in Abraham as all regarded Abraham as Father in some way.

St. Paul argues in Romans that Abraham is the ancestor of many nations. Abraham is our Father in the eyes of God. But for St. Paul, Abraham is our Father for one reason, **it is because he put his faith in God**. The book of Hebrews says that it was by Faith that Abraham set out on a great journey without knowing where he was going. St. Paul says that Abraham was justified by God not for his good deeds but simply because Abraham put his faith in God. Period. It is Abraham's faith that makes him Father to the world.

But Abraham's struggle for faith did not come easily. Throughout his life he was afraid. He was a generous person, he became wise, he believed in the power of persistent prayer, something Jesus also taught. But he was afraid.

Scripture says that even after many demonstrations of his faith he still struggled with fear. His greatest fear was that he would be childless even although an angel had appeared to him to promise that he would have an heir of his own flesh and blood. But Abraham went into a deep sleep one night and Scripture says **Terror** seized him.

I want to ask you a question for you to ponder in your mind. **Do you operate by faith or fear?** When the bills come in at the end of the month are you afraid? When the boss yells at you do you think that you will get fired? "Whatever would I do", you say, "if I was terminated?"

Perhaps you are staying in a bad marriage because you are afraid? Do you have a serious health problem? Are you afraid to die?

A 9-year-old boy was diagnosed with sickle cell anemia. Doctors told him he would not see his 13th birthday. Fear!

I knew one woman in Sacramento who was afraid to divorce her husband because he had a gun and said he would use it if she were to leave the relationship. Fear!

Here is the question: Do we operate by faith or by fear? Honestly now, which is it for you?

But you say it is smart to fear. Fear protects us.

The Trump administration believes that the US needs a wall between the US border and Mexico. Fear tells his supporters that the US needs it to be safe and secure.

People say that we can't go on accepting refugees in Canada either. What if they are covert members of Isis? We need to take counsel from our fears. It is the only realistic thing to do.

You say to me "That woman whose husband has a gun, is smart to stay with him. She could get shot and then what? And that boy needs to know that he won't see his 13th birthday and his parents need to prepare for his loss, get what medical help is available and do whatever they can to make their son comfortable as best they can. **Why you can't even cross the street without fear because fear keeps us safe!"**

Does it?

Alan Cohen in his delightful little book Dare to be Yourself writes: "**Fear Hurts us by creating results exactly the opposite of the benefits it pretends to bring to us.** Fear promises strength, while it is debilitating."

Abraham was quite a guy! He set out in faith at the age of 75 years. He left Ur of the Chaldees and set out not knowing where he was going. This was a very challenging thing to do. Many of us at age 75 are looking to slow down, take it easy, rest on our laurels and spectate the world. At 75 we have served and now it is time to retire and take life easy! Not so Abraham! He sells up and leaves Ur of the Chaldees and heads out into the desert with his extended family including Lot.

Yes, Abraham is good at the **Big picture**. He is full of faith in God... But! **Abraham takes counsel of fear in the everyday choices he makes.**

For instance, Sarah is stunningly good looking, and Abraham says to her 'Listen! I know you are a beautiful woman. When the Egyptians see you, they will say "That is his wife", and they will kill me and spare you. So, tell them you are my sister, so that they may treat me well because of you and spare my life out of regard for you.'

When they arrived in Egypt the Egyptians did indeed see that she was beautiful and sang her praises to Pharaoh and Sarah was taken into the palace.

Fear seemed to have given good counsel, for Pharaoh treated Abraham well: Abraham received flocks, oxen, donkeys, men and women slaves, female donkeys for breeding and camels and all he had to do was to pretend that Sarah was his sister! Women were considered as property in those days, but God was not amused at what happened to Sarah, who was forced into living a lie.

Yes, fear seemed to have given good counsel. Why, look at all the benefits Abram experienced from the lie!

But truth has a way of getting out and Pharaoh began to suffer and did not know the reason why. But when he did find out he was angry and summoned Abraham and said "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister?', So that I took her for my wife? Now here is your wife. Take her and go!" Then Abraham was deported, taken back to the border with his wife. But then Pharaoh did an unusual thing. He did **not** strip Abraham of all his possessions. Instead he threw him out with everything he possessed.

Did he do this out of pity for Sarah, who perhaps he had really loved? Was he afraid of God's anger? Did he just want rid of the whole business? Or was he an honorable man?

I've always thought that the Pharaoh was a decent man; that if Abraham had taken counsel of his faith, rather than his fears, he might have become a friend to Pharaoh. The lesson? Cohen is right: "Fear Hurts us by creating results exactly the opposite of the benefits it pretends to bring to us."

It is not good enough for us, to have just the big picture of Faith. We can't just live in our heads and show up to church on a Sunday and think we have faith. It needs to translate into the day to day or it is useless to us.

But you say to me "David you don't work for the guy I do. I'm afraid of the guy. He could get me fired." Or "David you don't live with my spouse. I have reason to fear." Or "David my health isn't good. We have heart attacks and strokes in our family and on my wife's side there is cancer." Or "David you don't know our financial situation. It stresses me out because the money is going to run out."

And so, we take counsel of our fears and hope for the best. Maybe we don't lie to others, but we do deceive ourselves believing that fear keep us safer than faith.

But does it? What are we turning down by choosing to live by fear? Here are some differences:

- **Faith opens us to the present moment;** fear lives only in the past or the future.
- **Faith tells us to put our trust in God and seek divine guidance and protection for our lives;**
- Fear thinks that is a pipe dream and is impractical.
- **Faith opens the door to miracles;** fear does not believe in anything more than luck.

Why is Faith considered so important by God?

The Lord who created us all wanted us to live by faith. God did not create us to be worrying all the time, living life stressed out! God is anxious that we discover that all success in life is an inside job. Faith is inside job one. When we get the inside right the rest follows.

Positive thinking is an inside job that comes from faith and trust. A good attitude is an inside job because we trust God for our future, not fear. When we go for that job interview or into the hospital for surgery, instead of taking counsel of our fears, we can take Jesus seriously when he says, "Whatever things you ask for in prayer, believe that you have them already and they shall be yours." It takes faith to take Jesus at His word.

I know personally that the day to day living by faith takes **practice**. We seem to be hard wired for fear, don't we?

But, like you, I am sure on a good day that we know in our heart of hearts that there is another way to live altogether. Letting go of fear is simply a decision that we have to make over and over again.

We choose to love.

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We choose to love, over and over again, and the good news is, that it gets easier!

Let me go back to the true story of the boy of 9 who was diagnosed with sickle cell anemia. The doctors told him that he would not see his 13th birthday and this was his response: He said "I think life is like checking a book out of the library. When you are born, you borrow your body. There's a due date, but you don't know when it is. Once the due date arrives, you just return the body."

This attitude amazed his doctors! There was no fear in it!

That boy is now over 38 years old. He is still living with sickle cell anemia, but he is not dying from it. He went to college, got married and has two beautiful children. He learned this great truth early! **To live life from a place of love, rather than fear!**

I spoke of the woman whose husband had a gun. Middle aged, **she decided to start to live her life by faith rather fear.** She decided not to threaten him in any way, but she slowly and kindly detached herself

from him. He got interested in another woman, but his first wife always included him in every family event as an honoured guest. When she got sick, he visited her in hospital. When their daughter got married he gave the daughter away. This amazing woman gave him the respect that he did not deserve, rather like Pharaoh sending Abraham away with all the gifts he had given to him.

Her secret? In midlife **she started to live her life from a place of Love! Love is so hard to resist.**

Remember what Scripture says: "Perfect love casts out fear!"

Medical Doctor Tim Jordan is a behavioural Pediatrician who is a coach of self esteem, building camp experiences for troubled youth.

One boy at the age of ten came to his camp with a lot of emotional baggage. He was labelled with all the labels: ADD, behaviour disorder and conduct disorder. He had been put on Ritalin and Prozac. He was always getting into fights. On the first day, he got into a fight and got a fat lip and the worst of it. He looked beaten up all the time and discouraged. He was tough to reach, but Tim Jordan with his experience managed to get through to him after a couple of days.

The boy David began to trust him. He talked to the doctor about his dad, the abuse, his fears and his anger and his sadness. He began to cry and then got into a deep sobbing as he let go hurt that he had been hanging onto for years. After that session, the colour returned to his face. He began to smile and made eye contact for the first time with other kids and the doctor. He just came alive, allowing other kids to hang with him as well as the counsellors. He was the biggest miracle of the week.

But the day his parents were to come for him he once again got into a fight, not unusual in the experience of the doctor, because kids fear to re-enter the situation of abuse they came from. It was always fear that lay behind the fighting.

So, Tim took David aside and asked him to walk with him. The doctor told David how proud he was of him and what a great distance he had come; how he had been willing to let the therapists in and how much he had changed as he let the love and trust in, rather than operating by fear.

At that very moment a butterfly came fluttering around them and they stopped to admire it. Tim told David that according to the Native American folk tradition, when a butterfly crosses your path it symbolizes that you are about to undergo a big transformation in the same way that a caterpillar changes into a butterfly. The doctor said that it was as if the butterfly was reinforcing all the changes that David had made in the past week. But David looked up with the old discouraged look on his face and said: "What if the butterfly is not here for me? What if he is here for you?"

Tim was stunned, and his mind started to race to come up with a reassuring answer, but before he could do so, there was a God moment. The butterfly suddenly flew up into the air, fluttered around them again, then landed on David's shirt right over his heart. No words were spoken. None were needed.

Tim said that he would never forget that boy's face in that miraculous moment: It was one of pure joy and hope- hope that he could be different; that he could trust people; that it is safe to let people in; that there will be people who would care about him and love him: that he did not need to live life any longer from a place of fear.

This is something that we all can learn: not to have faith just in the big picture and God's plan for our lives only, but in the day to day, where the rubber hits the road, where only faith can get us through. And the greatest learning is that faith is for us personally, not someone else; that the butterfly of faith can settle on **our** hearts and transform **us!**

This is what St. Paul says can make us happy: "Happy those whose crimes are forgiven, whose failures are blotted out. Happy the person whom God considers to be perfect because of their faith."

God accepts us not for anything good we might have done, but solely due to our faith. Indeed, faith blots out the scoreboard of our triumphs and failures. **We are thus delivered into freedom from performance, in order to be free to love!**

And so, we are happy. Happy to love ourselves, each other and the God who made us all.

Amen.