“Love Casts Out Fear”

[[All new to NPYM Faith & Practice.]]

See also Community, Peace, Right Relationship to Wealth, Simplicity, Worship, and the sections on safety, harassment, and abuse under “Practice.”

“Be not afraid” are the words that appear most frequently in the Bible. When those in power use fear to manipulate and control, and people face abuse, violence, and oppression, it can be challenging to follow the traditional advice to live adventurously. Yet this advice is always present for Friends because fear corrodes our ability to listen and respond to the Spirit.

Early Friends were challenged with public ridicule, confiscation of property, persecution, prison, and sometimes death for practicing their faith. Although Friends today are blessed with the freedom to worship openly and minister to and support one another, examples of the courageous witness of early Friends are an inspiration for us today facing different but similarly oppressive social and political orders and conditions.

When admonished to “fear God”, early Friends knew that this fear referred to the awe, respect, and wonder Friends feel in the Presence. Many Friends still quake when the Spirit moves them to minister or witness faithfully.

However, fear can be a healthy and useful response in some circumstances, for instance when it prompts Friends to pay attention and take precautions for the safety of themselves, their loved ones, and others.

Yet fear can separate us from each other and from God and can lead to violence, discord, manipulation, intimidation, and control. Fear can cloud our judgment and diminish our abilities to discern, learn, and grow. Fear can be a subtle and destructive force hindering our journey towards spiritual maturity. As each of us grows in the Spirit, we are called to let go of ego-based fears: of making mistakes; of not being approved of; of having our needs go unmet; of conflict, discomfort, illness, loneliness, and diminishment; and of not being perfect (or even good enough). We cannot avoid fear by attempting to control and use people, things, and events in an attempt, usually futile, to make things turn out the way we want.

Fear is a stumbling-block to us in living out our testimonies as Friends. Fear can distort our understanding, undermine our trust, and destroy our sense of community. But living in the Spirit within a supportive, faithful fellowship gives us courage and guidance to let our lives speak, even when we are afraid, and helps us turn toward each other and toward the Light. When fear threatens our resolve, God’s love comforts and strengthens us. When we trust God, fear has less ability to control us and we can learn to let go of it.

Quotations

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

Psalm 27:1
Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things all these things will be given to you as well.

So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

Matthew 6:31-34

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.

1 John 4:18

Friends are reminded that our Religious Society took form in times of disturbance, and that its continuing testimony has been the power of God to lead men and women out of the confusions of outward violence, inward sickness, and all other forms of self-will, however upheld by social convention. As death comes to our willfulness, a new life is formed in us, so that we are liberated from distractions and frustrations, from fears, angers, and guilts. Thus we are enabled to sense the Inward Light and to follow its leadings. Friends are advised to place God, not themselves, in the center of the universe and, in all aspects of inward life and outward activity, to keep themselves open to the healing power of the Spirit of Christ.

These advices were paraphrased by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting from materials contained in the Epistles of the Yearly Meeting of Pennsylvania and the Jerseys, 1694 and 1695.

What Jesus was saying is that there is a difference between ordinary prudence and the fear that paralyzes and alienates one from his fellow men. Rufus Jones said about those very words of Jesus, “Christ’s major point in the Sermon on the Mount is to get rid of fears and anxieties.” It might also be said that the substance of His mission as a teacher was to set men free from the slavery of fears.

Dorothy Hutchinson, Unless One Is Born Anew, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 143, 1965

Miraculously, God can still work through our blocked minds, deficient vision, and dulled spiritual hearing. Once in a while, when we are experiencing a bit of humility and feeling less protective of our egos, wonderful things can happen. It is then that God lets us know the peace of a worry-free moment. It is then that insoluble problems seem to work themselves out, without our attention. We must hold fast to the memory of these experiences of faith because they hold the promise of more faith and encourage us to surrender to God’s Wisdom.


This is what the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus symbolizes for me: if you are willing to go into and through your fear, even though it feels like death, you will experience, miracle of miracles, life more fully and abundantly than ever.


It may not be quite accurate to say that “perfect love had cast out my fear.”
I still experienced fear, and have again on subsequent occasions. But I learned that I swim in a river of love, that I can orient myself to it, and feel its power. When I do so, I know that I can survive the fear, and go beyond it, to a powerful place of peace. I learned that I cannot simply make this transition just once, and stay in that place of love, for the fear comes back. So I need to make that journey again and again. I needed disciplines, familiar paths to tread, to re-connect with love again and again, and feel the fears subside. I understand this love as a manifestation of the Spirit, mediated through the ministry of my sisters and brothers, my wife and sons, my friends, and sometimes even strangers.


Advices

Live adventurously.

Friends are urged to examine their fears and be open to release those that prevent them from growing in the Spirit and following their Guide as way opens. As they continue the spiritual process of letting go of their fears and following the motions of love, Friends trust that they are being led into a new, more abundant and joy-filled life. Although this life is not always free of pain, trial, or struggle, it is graced with courage and comfort that will endure any adversity.

Friends are lovingly advised to exercise the prudence and caution necessary to provide safety in the meeting community. Safety is especially important for children in our care and for those who have been dominated through fear, harassment, or abuse.

We entreat those to whom we give authority and power to use it to unify and reconcile us, rather than using fear to divide and exploit us.

When neighbors and co-workers are acting from a pervasive climate of fear, Friends are encouraged to answer that of God in them by promoting peace rather than conflict.

Let us reach out to both those who are creating fear and those who are controlled by fear. Harmony is restored through reconciliation based in mutual love. Disharmony is a manifestation of fear and the resulting separation from God, from ourselves, from our fellow human beings, and from all of creation.

Queries

How do we face our fears, name them, learn from them, and transform them?

Does fear control our lives? Are our decisions based on fear, or do we trust the Spirit’s urging toward love and reconciliation? How do we let go of our fears, trusting the Spirit, so we can restore peace in our meetings and communities?

Are we careful to recognize and attend to our own fears and the fears of others compassionately?

Is our community a shelter where we can grow in the Spirit? What does it mean for us to be “safe” from that which we fear, or from those whom we fear? How do our efforts to make ourselves safe contribute to harmony or division in our communities?
community? How can our community provide the best combination of safety and challenge to encourage spiritual growth?

Do we encourage each other through love to act in faithful witness? How do we identify the disharmony that gives rise to our fears? How do we confront those fears which deceive, enslave, and stop us from living faithfully?

In times of trial and terror how can we open our hearts, return to God’s love, and move forward?