

## **“Fear and Trembling”**

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Assistant Minister  
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, on October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2007

What are you most afraid of?

I mean really afraid of.

Maybe it's losing your job or your health declining? Maybe it's a natural disaster, isolation, long sermons or other religions sacred texts? Maybe you are afraid of rejection, or isolation, of not being good enough, or of simply running out of time.

The things that we are afraid of may indeed be different, but our reactions to fear are usually similar. Our palms sweat, our mouths get dry, our stomachs churn, our heart rates increase. Although we may not actually notice any of this when we are petrified. Petrifying is exactly what happens to us. We are hardened, deadened, and numbed to our internal and external worlds.

When we are fearful, whatever situation we are in can become artificially fixed and magnified. We can be tricked into behaving as though whatever situation we are currently in will always be this way – unless we do something about it. We can be tricked into believing, if only for a moment, that we have absolute control over the outcome.

Fear, in itself, is not a bad thing. It exists for our own protection. Fear acts as an early warning signal to remove us from danger. It is how we assess and categorize a situation so that we can make quick and efficient decisions based on the information at hand. But fear can also petrify us into a rigid ideology that prevents us from experiencing the ever changing world around us. Fear over-simplifies and fixates, so that we can make decisions about our safety, even if what we fear does not actually threaten our survival. When we are petrified, we will tense up, buckle down, and brace for the next impact. When we are frightened we can also numb out and actually disassociate from our physical experience, frozen in our tracks. We can be with the fear, breathing, noticing, moving into the experience, noticing our interior and the changing information around us. In fear we can also have an opportunity to choose the very thing that at first feels counterintuitive – but that just might save us – *staying vulnerable*.

In a hospital waiting room, there seems to be a leveling of the fear playing field. When we are faced with the commonality of our own mortality, and the common denominator of love and fear, barriers that separate one person from another give way to raw vulnerability. There is something about being dragged head-first into powerlessness that cuts across race and class

and cultural pleasantries. There is something about loss meeting loss, when fear bubbles up from the deep places, where it is usually kept tamed and out of sight. This raw vulnerability can create a space for complete strangers to speak from their hearts uncensored.

In a collection of short stories called *Listening for God*, Raymond Carver focuses on the meaningful contact between complete strangers in the midst of unimaginable fear. One of these connections happens in a hospital waiting room. He describes a white middle class family, in the 1950s, who loses their 8 year old son after he is struck by a car.

The Caucasian mother of the 8 year old boy meets an African American mother in the waiting room whose son is in surgery. They meet, not skin to skin, rather they meet fear to fear, human to human, and mother to mother, despite all cultural expectations. They are not supposed to talk to one another, care about each other, mingle with one another. For their own "safety" they have been told. Yet under the hospital waiting room lights they sit together, connected by their fear instead of separated by it.

When I served as a hospital chaplain, I spent many nights on call. There was nothing that could make my heart jump out of my chest like the sound of the pager going off in the middle of the night. I would only lightly sleep, in anticipation of its ring, but I would still nearly jump out of my skin. After receiving a page I would call in to discover where I was needed.

On one particular night it was the emergency waiting room. I hurried down the stairs breathing in that unmistakable hospital smell of desperation and concentrated cleanser. I met the doctor and was told that a man in his forties had just died suddenly of a heart attack. He was in the bathroom shaving, preparing to go to work. There was no warning. It was just an ordinary day that will no longer be ordinary. It was my responsibility to meet the family with the doctor, and let them know that there was nothing they could do to save him.

Poet Michael Leunig writes:

*There are only two feelings: Love and fear.  
There are only two languages: Love and fear.  
There are only two activities: Love and fear.  
There are only two motives, two procedures, two frameworks, two results.  
Love and fear. Love and fear.*

*Both are always present  
And at the core of most of our other secondary emotions  
Anger, loneliness, frustration, grief  
A desire to be seen, known, liked wanted and loved.*

We needn't be within the walls of the hospital waiting room to recognize that we share these experiences of love and fear with every human being. Author, Patricia Hampel describes an experience of the fear and trembling that permeates any boundaries that might separate us: Catholic or Protestant, brown or white, rich or poor, Muslim or Christian.

In Hampel's story, a young girl asks her older Buddhist neighbor:

*"But do you believe in God?"*

*He paused for a moment and looked up at the sky where big spreading clouds streamed by. "God, isn't the problem," he said. Some ancient fissure split open, a fine crack in reality: so there was a problem. Just as I'd always felt.*

Hampel writes:

*Beneath the family solidity...past the emphatic certainties of St. Luke's catechism class, there was [in fact] a problem that would never go away. What alarmed me was my sense of recognition. Of course there was a problem. It wasn't God. Life itself was the problem. Something was not right, would never be right. I'd sensed it all along, a kind of fishy, vestigial quiver in the spine, way past thought. Life, deep down, lacked the substantiality it seemed to display."*

Hampel continues:

*The physical world full of detail and interest was a parched top soil that could be blown away... Some people blamed God. [But] God wasn't the problem. The clouds passing in the big sky kept dissipating, changing form. That was the problem -but... Such worries resolved nothing, and were best left unworried- the unshivered shiver."*

In a hospital waiting room, the parched top soil is blown away, and what is left exposed are the roots of what really matters. In the waiting room there is an understanding and an assumption that the clouds dissipate. Sometimes gradually and sometimes abruptly. In the waiting room, it is as though we are given permission to tremble: to be with our fear and uncertainty. To release the petrified and unshivered shiver.

What would it take to carry that deep sense of recognition and of risk, out of the waiting room and into the world? How do we carry with us, that we are all (regardless of class, race, or power) experiencing the impermanence of this life? How do we remember the problem and the common language that binds us: fear and love? Fear and love.

Life can be downright frightening. Knowing who is friend and who is foe is a survival skill that is indeed necessary on the battlefield, but less often in our day to day living. We gain clues about a person's motivations or intentions based on the categories to which they belong. But we cannot predict an individual's behavior based on the behavior of a group to which they belong. Scientifically it cannot be done. We can guess, on average, a general group outcome but we cannot predict any single individual's response. Yet, we do it all the time.

How many times have we described an individual's behavior based on an identity we have discovered? Oh... she is southern. Oh... he's not educated. Oh... she's a Baptist. Oh... he's in Greenpeace. One of *those*... Such a response is more about us than them, and more about our fear than their behavior. And these assumptions will petrify, becoming permanent filters through which we experience fluid and changing people. I have, on the other hand, also experienced these categories as helpful. There is relief entirely based on our assumptions. Like when I discover in a crowded room that someone is a Unitarian, or is from Oklahoma, or plays guitar, or is married to a lawyer. Connected, I am often willing to go deeper, stay longer in conversation, in relationship. Can we in fact hold the categorical information, hold our assumptions, and check them out with the individual standing before us with curiosity instead of judgment? With love instead of with fear? It is not easy. What if we imagined we were all in the waiting room together?

The hospital where I was a chaplain was in a very diverse neighborhood and the emergency room was always full of people from nearly every walk of life. As I walked through to meet the family of the young man who had just died, my palms were sweating, my heart was racing. I turned toward the room where the family was waiting, not knowing anything about them, only knowing that from this moment on their lives would be profoundly changed. The chapel was on the way down to the waiting room. I stepped in, and was alone. I sat down for 30 seconds and prayed to be open to receive whatever greeted me. To be in the moment with them – present to their story and their pain. I prayed to be open to my own fear but not paralyzed by it. I stayed until my knees stopped shaking.

I left the chapel and went to the family waiting room. I opened the door, and there saw the deceased's wife and four teenage sons. Two of the boys had only light jackets in the cold Chicago February. These boys would never again have their father. This woman would never again hear her husband's voice. The details of what happened next flowed through me like a sieve. All I remember is the faces of those boys, and his wife's plea. She simply said "No." Nothing else mattered. Not my skin color or theirs, not my theology or theirs. All I could do was be.

I remember, in the end, that she was profoundly grateful for my presence and to not have to walk through her fear alone. I remember holding her trembling hand as the doctor left for the next patient. I stayed through the night in silence and in prayer, the waiting room serving as our makeshift sanctuary.

This sanctuary too, is a waiting room. As we hold ourselves up against the gravity of this life, standing on this earth. May we be mindful of our own fear and trembling: bending what may be petrified, reaching out to hold one another's hands, and carrying our love into the world.

Amen.