

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/1/2012, Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday
Mark 14:1 - 15:47

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³⁶And one ran and filled a sponge full of vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink, saying, Let alone; let us see whether Elias will come to take him down. ³⁷And Jesus cried with a loud voice, and gave up the ghost. (Mark 15:36-37, KJV)

Do you know the chief difference between Jesus and you and me? It is the matter of fear. In the time of crisis, Jesus did not let fear control him. Why? Because, as St. John put it, “perfect love casteth out fear” (1 John 4:18, KJV).

This was the soul-searching question posed by dear old Fr. Thomas Green to a clergy group known as the Bronx Winkel. “Do you know the chief difference between Jesus and us?” We were all sitting around the table. He looked us in the eye and spoke of perfect love casting out fear.

We all tend to call him “Father Green.” The lovely title “Father” is used for Catholic priests, and Father Green is not Catholic, but a born and bred Missouri Synod Lutheran clergymen. Still, there are certain Lutheran clergy for whom it entirely natural to address them as “Father.” Perhaps you recall Rev. Charles Trexler, of blessed memory. He was one of those beloved clergy the rest of the clergy simply referred to as “Father Trexler.” Likewise with Father Green -- a man of the same generation as Father Trexler. Younger clergy simply acknowledge Thomas Green as being their father-in-the-Lord. However much we might love our own bishops, in a sense Father Green is also our bishop. His is the voice of Christ we tend to listen to most of all. Glad to say, Father Green preached here last Good Friday and is set to preach for us again this Good Friday, five days from now.

That saying, “perfect love casteth out fear,” provides the two foundations of this sermon. What Jesus did on the Cross is the maximum example of “perfect love.” And the fact that he died on *a cross* is a maximum reason for fear. Let me begin with that, with the fear¹.

¹ In this portion of the sermon, about the fearful nature of the cross, I am indebted to theologian Katherine Sonderegger of Virginia Theological Seminary, for her lecture “Why the Roman Cross?” at the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology conference at Loyola University, Baltimore, Maryland, June 15, 2011.

THE ROMAN CROSS

The cross was not designed to shelter the tender conscience of onlookers. It was designed to torment the one being crucified and to appall everyone in sight. The whole process was designed to change a human being into a thing. The goal of crucifixion was to permit the subject to *live*. Death was release. “The crucified died of starving for breath and pity” (Katherine Sonderegger). The breaking of the legs was a mercy. Crucifixion was designed to terrify and control the onlookers.

The cross was a particularly Roman form of execution. It expressed the relation between the Roman Empire and Israel. It was reserved for outsiders, not for Roman citizens. The cross was for slaves and non-Romans. Pontius Pilate represents Rome. He asserts the immense power of the Empire against the little land of Israel. This is a trial between Jews and Gentiles, with Jesus part of Israel. “Shall I crucify *your* King?” asks Pilate. It is part of statecraft: Israel has no power of life and death of its own people. “We have no king but Caesar” is but the political reality.

Jesus was executed on a Roman cross on Passover. Passover is a political eruption against the empire, against Egypt and now against Rome. Passover is the threat against every empire. It is the threat that a small subjugated people shall nonetheless throw off the yoke of foreign domination, even against impossible odds, because that small people has a great God. Passover was precisely the kind of holiday on which Rome wants to assert its domination. On that first Good Friday, then, the Roman Empire defends its authority and intimidates the people in this ferocious way: the Empire crucifies Jesus.

On Maundy Thursday, four days from now, we will read about Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. That is the work of slaves. St. John says that Jesus is a slave. He washes feet, and he dies, as slaves do throughout the world. God enters into slavery and dies on that First Good Friday! What a thought! What a frightening thing to face. But Jesus conquers his fear of that bloody cross. His fear, intense as it was, melted beside the immensity of his love for you, for me. As St. John puts it, perfect love casteth out fear.

So, that is my first emphasis: The cross is a frightening and appalling time of suffering. Next, let’s turn to the even greater love of Christ for us.

THE LOVE THAT CASTS OUT FEAR

Let’s begin with Peter and his kind of love. Peter meant to be brave, but he fell short of it. He was sure that he would stand with Jesus. He would never abandon his Master. Indeed, he was certain that though every one else should flee from Jesus, he would not. I think we can understand Peter’s determination here. He too is relying on the rule, “perfect love casteth out fear.” He loved

Jesus, and therefore he could not imagine himself being so frightened as to abandon his friend and master. And yes, Peter did love Jesus, I feel quite sure of it. Yet he did not love in *this* way. He did not love with that perfect love that casts out fear. He loved Jesus, yes, but, as it turned out, he loved himself more. His love was not the kind of love that spares nothing, not even himself, for the sake of the beloved.

But the love of Jesus *is* that sort – the sort of love that overrides every other concern, even the fear that would be so natural when facing the cross. Betrayed by his friend Judas, the love of Jesus still compelled him onwards toward the cross. Denied by his foremost disciple, by Peter, the one who had sworn to be loyal, love nonetheless staggers onward, carrying Jesus toward the cross. Examined and condemned by this world’s authorities, Jesus stayed his hand. He did not summon his twelve legions of angels to rescue him², but permitted himself to be thrust onwards to the cross. Treated roughly by the guards, struck upon the face by them, spat upon, mocked with a robe of scarlet, pressed down upon with a crown of thorns, his love was not deterred, but moved on toward the dreadful cross. Abandoned by his disciples, derided by the crowds, weary and weak, and then crucified with heavy spikes pounded through his human flesh, he hanged in agony on that cross and spoke of forgiveness: “Father, forgive.”

FORGIVE WHO?

Forgive who? “Forgive these Roman soldiers, yes, for they know not what they do. But also forgive Gregory, for he is among my disciples, he claims my name and I claim him, yet he too much falls into sin. Forgive him.

“Forgive yon child, forgive his mother, forgive her father, forgive this whole congregation gathered here in Immanuel Lutheran Church on 88th Street and Lexington Avenue.”

And so it is that our Lord Jesus intercedes for us. On the Cross, he interposes his body and his blood for us. By his wounds, Jesus asks Reality to take pity on us and grant us salvation. He knows that of which he speaks. His appeal to you, to me, has iron determination behind it. He has walked the path of sacrificing himself for others, and he bids us to follow his pattern of life.

Do not let fear, then, ruin your love. You have people depending on you. You have people needing you. You have people you love. Sometimes fear intervenes between us and those we love. We fear exhaustion. We fear lost opportunities if we persevere in our path of love. But persevere in that path! Let love so prevail in your life that it will overcome your natural fear for yourself

² Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? (Matthew 26:53, KJV)

and in some measure be a tribute to the One whose perfect love cast out all fear, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.