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All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. Amen.

What makes you afraid? What keeps you awake at night? Are you afraid of losing a loved one, of losing your health or your job? Are you concerned about your children's or grandchildren's future? Are you worried about your financial status? Are you afraid of being alone?

I don't know about you, but when I am acting out of fear, I do some of the worst things and make some of the worst decisions! Do you know what I mean? Fear has a way of causing impulsive and sometimes irrational behavior, of leading us to misidentify threats and even opportunities, and of inhibiting our ability to see our way clearly through challenges that face us. And when all of those things happen, it's hard to be smart, or sensible, or compassionate.

In today's Gospel lesson, Mark contrasts faith and fear. Jesus tells the disciples for the third time that he will be betrayed and killed, and will be raised on the third day. Mark lets us know that the disciples are afraid to ask Jesus what he means. But the next thing you know, they're arguing with each other about who is the greatest!

The disciples' fear had paralyzed them, keeping them from asking the questions they wanted answers to -- and it also pushed them into a mode of looking out only for themselves at the same time.

Now this isn't the only time that Mark pits fear and faith against each other. Remember that after Jesus calms the storm that terrified the disciples, he asks, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" And when Jairus is distraught because he has been told his daughter is dead, Jesus says, "Do not fear, only believe." For Mark, it is not doubt that is the opposite of faith; it is fear - or, at least, that type of fear that paralyzes us, distorts how we think, and drives us to despair.

Back in the day of the ancient world, honor and shame were important in people's lives. Those who were rich and powerful tried to demonstrate their honor by the company they kept. There was no middle class. Most of the wealth was in the hands of relatively few folks at the top of the social structure, and the vast majority of

the people were very poor. It was so important to the rich to be on top that they only associated with people as rich as themselves, and they would insult and humiliate those who were only slightly less rich, hoping to earn favor with those who were above them on the social ladder. And the poor? Having to interact with them would have brought shame to the rich. No one who hoped to rise socially would acknowledge them. It was as if the rich were afraid of the poor.

If the disciples in today's story had voiced their fears to Jesus instead of keeping silent, he would have invited them to have faith - not as intellectual agreement - but to have faith as *movement*, as taking a step forward (even if it's a little step) in spite of doubt and fear - to have faith as *doing* - even the most nominal thing - because of hope and trust in God's promises. But they don't share their fears with Jesus. Instead, each one starts trying to look out for number one - arguing about who will have the most honor and status.

So Jesus turns the tables on them. Instead of going with the prevailing ideas about power and security, Jesus invites the disciples to imagine that abundant life is a result, not of having accumulated a lot of power, but by having displayed vulnerability - not through achievements, but through service - and not by collecting powerful friends but by welcoming children, the absolute lowest on the social ladder.

For Jesus, to welcome a child is to extend the simplest of acts to an individual whom society dismisses as ultimately insignificant - someone who has no accomplishments, no greatness and no status. Jesus invites us to welcome every person in the same manner, without regard for his or her worldly importance. To welcome another person in that way is to welcome Jesus himself, and in turn, to welcome God who sent him.

To hear children called insignificant beings does not make much sense to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century western world. If anything is true, we are more likely to subscribe to child worship than to belittling their status. So maybe to make it have more impact on us, we should emphasize another group that Jesus asks us to care for: strangers.

Ah! Now there is something to cause fear to rise in our throats, right? Strangers - those who aren't like us because of language, looks, religion, culture, country of origin - can provoke normally unspoken fears, and be the catalyst for incredibly

unchristian behavior by those of us who are the "us", as opposed to "them." Consider the hateful rhetoric currently spewed by some about undocumented immigrants, or countless groups of "others" - Jews, gays and gypsies in Hitler's Germany, Palestinians in Israel, Muslims, blacks, women, to name a few, in this country. As today's Syrian refugee crisis becomes exponentially larger with every passing hour, our fear of the other increases as well, but we are called to replace that fear with faith and to welcome that other.

It is important to know that welcome is not merely receiving others; it is receiving others with contentment and joy, especially in response to a need. Jesus' message to the disciples and us is that if we want to be great, we must celebrate and welcome others, especially those who can benefit us the least. And this kind of welcome is possible only when we see God in others.

It's not really all that hard when you think about it - to serve others, to open ourselves to another's need, to be honest about our own needs and fears, to show kindness to a child, to welcome a stranger. Because each time we make even the smallest of these gestures in faith - that is, when we find the strength and courage to reach out to another in compassion even when we are afraid - we will find that our fear diminishes, replaced by an increasingly determined faith that fear and death do not have the last word.

Our Bishop Russell has written the clergy this week to remind us that we have an opportunity to see God in the faces of Syrians and other refugees, to see them as people who have endured the ravages of civil war, who seek peace, who long for home. We are being offered a sacred moment. He asks us to do three things: 1) **Pay attention**. Educate ourselves. Don't ignore or dismiss those that the world ignores. 2) **Pray**. Pray for the refugees; pray for those who work for their care; pray especially for the children. 3) **Do something**. The easiest way is by donating - money, shoes, blankets, time. I will publish some ways you can do these things in this week's Herald.

In a few minutes we will baptize Lyanna Grace Miller. As we welcome her into the Body of Christ, we will repeat our Baptismal Covenant, as always. In that covenant we will answer the question: Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity and freedom of every human being? I would add to that question, 'respect the dignity and freedom of every human being, *despite our fear?*' Claiming our identity as the baptized, we are called to choose faith over fear. To

help that happen, I would invite you, if you choose, to take one of the index cards from the ends of the pews, and write on it a word or phrase about something you are afraid of. Then put the card in the offering plate as it is passed and offer up your fear.

Fear keeps us from moving. Faith gives us the strength to go forward in hope. Which will you choose?