

Mar. 9 & 10, 2019  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent

All Saints Parish, Syracuse  
Fr. Fred Daley

### Be Not Afraid

As our Banner, hanging in the theme space, proclaims – in a variety of languages used by our Parishioners – our Lenten theme this year is: “Be Not Afraid,” a phrase used often by Jesus and quoted twenty-two times in Scripture.

Is Jesus asking the impossible? Isn't fear a normal human emotion?

Fear has a legitimate role to play in our lives and society without this elemental alarm system our ancestors would not have survived and we would not be warned of potential dangers or be sufficiently motivated to address them. For example a healthy fear of climate change happening motivating us to marshal our resources to face the crisis

What Jesus is getting at is unhealthy fear – fear that can paralyze us, chain us in, keep us from growing and becoming as individuals and society

Fear – when it becomes excessive or misdirected – is dangerous; it can lead us to misperceive the world around us and can undermine our willingness to constructively interact with others; and that's exactly what's happening in our Nation right now. Many express the fact that they've never experienced fear as they do currently.

At his last National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, DC on February 4, 2016, President Obama addressed this unhealthy fear in our nation when he stated:

*Fear can lead us to lash out against those who are different or lead us to get some sinister “other” under control. Fear can lead us to succumb to despair or paralysis or Cynicism. Fear can feed our most selfish impulses and erode the bonds of community... Fear can be contagious, spreading through societies and nations, and if we let it consume us; the consequences of that fear can be worse than any outward threat.”*

Many fears are manufactured or highly inflated by those who feel the creation of a climate of dread useful and profitable:

- fear of refugees;
- fear of Muslims;
- fear of minorities;
- fear of the poor;
- even fear of our neighbor;
- and the list goes on... .

On March 31, 2016 in an interview with Bob Woodward and Robert Costas at the Trump International Hotel in Washington, DC, then Presidential Candidate Donald Trump stated: “Real power is – I don’t even want to use the word – fear.” “Real power is – I don’t even want to use the word – fear.” In other words: a way to have power over people is to make them afraid! Probably there is no better example of this than the situation at our southern border, the obsession with building a wall and the declaration of a national emergency.

Yes, there is a national emergency: it’s our broken immigration system and our elected leaders fear to pass comprehensive immigration reform. Yes, there is a global emergency: 65 million refugee seekers, asylum-seekers and intentionally displaced people around our world fleeing war and violence, poverty and oppression; the same situation facing our fore-parents in Egypt as described in our First Reading from Deuteronomy.

*“When the Egyptians maltreated us and oppressed us imposing hard labor upon us we cried to God who heard our cry saw our affliction, our toil, our oppression and brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and outstretched arm; and with signs and wonders brought us into this country – this land flowing with milk and honey.”*

Sisters and brothers, isn’t that the story of our Nation? While not ignoring America’s original sin of genocide of our Native American sisters and brothers and the disgrace of slavery of African sisters and brothers, what has made the United States of America great has been welcoming immigrants fleeing oppression and using their gifts to build our Nation through the generations. Most of us here are all descendants of immigrants and refugees. This welcoming is symbolized by that green clad Lady of the Harbor, who holds high a torch so that *‘huddled masses, yearning to breathe free, the homeless and tempest tossed can find a golden door!’*

Pope Francis constantly reminds the world that migrants and refugees are human beings, our brothers and sisters, children of God; not simply ‘illegals’ or ‘aliens’ or ‘enemy combatants’ or ‘the worst of the worst.’ He never tires of directing us to the words of Jesus: that the anxious face of the apparent “stranger” is the muddied bloodied face of the Lord... .

The anxious face of the apparent “stranger” is the muddied bloodied face of the Lord!

During his visit to the United States in September 2015, the Pope, speaking of immigrants and refugees, stated:

*“Do not be afraid to welcome them; offer them the warmth of the love of Christ and you will unlock the mystery of their heart. I am certain that, as so often in the past, these people will enrich America and the Church.”*

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And so, sisters and brothers, as we begin our Lenten journey – with fears swirling around us in our world; with fear swirling around our own lives too; unhealthy fear that can rob us of creativity, resourcefulness and freedom that can make our lives miserable; as we begin our 40-day Retreat “spring-cleaning of our hearts” – what might we do to move from what Henri Nouwen calls the “house of fear, to the house of love”?

In today’s Gospel Jesus can be our model: before beginning his public ministry of birthing the reign of God in our midst, showing us by word and example how we and our world can become what God intended, he went on a 40-day retreat in the desert to reflect on how he was going to do it. I’m sure being human he had many fears, and the spirit of evil tempted him to use the way of the world: power, prestige, greed, selfishness, pride, control; but – in prayer – God showed him the way; giving him the grace – the courage – to go forward, rejecting evil and choosing good.

What is the antidote of fear? Are there any remedies? Jesus and the spiritual giants of our Religious Tradition – in fact, the spiritual giants of most religious traditions, tell us that the development of a stronger, deeper spiritual life is surely at the core of an answer. A great deal of inner strength is needed – without the voice of conscience, the voice of our inner True-selves, our heart, our center where the spark of the divine is present – fear will continue to control us.

Thomas Merton tells us that if we dare penetrate our own silence and dare to advance into our hearts, we will truly recover the light which is the intimate union, in the depths of our own hearts, of God’s Spirit and our own secret, innermost selves, so that we and God are in Truth – one Spirit.

Sisters and brothers, yes, the world *is* scary, but it is also beautiful, mysterious, still undiscovered. How long we live is not as important an issue as how we live. At the heart of Merton’s writing, at the heart of Jesus’ Gospel is that *fear need not rule our lives or our world!*

As one concrete action step, we here at All Saints are in dialogue with a missionary group: Casa Marianella, at our southern border who are connecting in ministry with a population of Congolese immigrants seeking asylum in the United States. As noted in our Bulletin, this population – as asylum seekers – has a very different set of circumstances and status than the majority of our present Parishioners from Congo. We have been asked to accept a small family into our Sanctuary Space and to accompany and support them as they continue their journey to receive asylum and to build a life of security here in the United States. We have the commitment of our Interfaith Sanctuary Coalition to work with us in support of this family and our Sisters of St. Joseph – Sisters Maura and Anne Marie – have given the “green light” to have a family move into the Sanctuary Space in the Annex which they share. We are simply awaiting confirmation from the folks at Casa Marianella.

The Parish is offering each of us the opportunity to write down our fears on the slips of paper underneath the banner and to place them in the bowl, as a sign of our willingness and effort to release our fears. During Holy Week, we will burn these pieces of paper the ashes of which will be incorporated into the base of our Paschal Candle – symbolizing the new light and life of Christ

Finally, in the coming weeks of Lent, let us pray for one another, remembering: perfect love casts out all fear.

Amen!