

"GETTING RID OF FEAR"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
October 4, 1998

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INTRODUCTION

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DEVELOPMENT

Elevators? Bridges? You name it. Fear is a terrible thing. The word "fear" comes from the Old English "faer", meaning sudden danger. It refers to fright where fright is justified. It refers to danger that is concrete, knowable and real. In such cases, fear is appropriate and sometimes useful if one is to escape harm, but sometimes we're afraid way out of proportion to the actual dangers we face.

Remember Steve Allen? In an interview that he once had with a doctor on his program, Allen's guest said to him,

"The only two really instinctive fears in men are the fear of loud noises and the fear of falling. What are your fears, Mr. Allen...what are you afraid of?"

And without skipping a beat, Steve Allen said,

"I have a great fear of making a loud noise while falling".

Oh, fear is a terrible thing. Many of us would give our right arm to have some one take our fears from us. You may have heard about the man who had terrible hallucinations that plagued him for a number of years.

"I believed that there were wild, hideous animals hiding under my bed" the man told his friend. "Every night when the lights go out, they would come out, prowl all around the room and scare the stew out of me. But my brother finally solved my problem". "Oh, is he a doctor, a psychiatrist?" asked the friend. "No" said the man.... "He's a carpenter. He sawed the legs off my bed".

PAUL'S ADVICE

Well, there are all kinds of solutions to fear, but St. Paul, in writing to Timothy, give us the most helpful bit of advice. Hear his solution...

In Second Timothy, chapter one, he writes:

"For this reason, I remind you to fan into flame the gift

of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So, do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the Gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life - not because of anything we have done, but because of His own purpose and grace."

Listen to those lifting words again.

"God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power....of love....and of self-discipline."

Now, I ask you: can you think of a better "three point" formula for successful living than this...that God would replace our timidity and our fear... with power, with love, with self-discipline.

TIMIDITY

It's not good to be timid. You may know what I'm talking about. Your timidity manifests itself as shyness. Studies reveal that between 80 and 90 million Americans are shy...that's four out of every ten of us and it's a shame, really. Shy people tend to have low self-esteem and sometimes think that they're socially inadequate. Shy people can be their own worst critics, demanding high standards of performance for themselves. Some shy people don't always know what to say or do in social situations...and they are sometimes quite lonely. They're apt to have fewer close friends and date less often than non-shy people. Shy people earn less money and have difficulty advancing their careers. It's no fun being shy...let me tell you.

And, of course, you don't have to be shy to be timid. Some who are quite gregarious and vocal lose their tongues at times...seeking to "blend in" rather than stand out when out of step with the crowd. Most of us are timid souls at heart. Just at that moment when we are called to be courageous, our resolve weakens and just when we need to stand up for our convictions, our hearts grow faint. Just when we have opportunity to speak out for Christ's way, we hide behind the adage that religion, after all, is a private affair.

St. Paul comes across to me as a man who had conquered his timidity. He was a bold, adventurous man who lived his life to the fullest...even if some of that life was lived behind prison bars. So, we do well to heed the words of Paul when he says that being timid is not God's will for us. God is wanting us to vanquish our timidity by giving us the spirit of power, of love, of self-discipline.

So, let's take a few minutes to examine each of these attributes and see if we can't become a bit bolder and a bit more adventurous...like St. Paul.

POWER

Focus first on the word "power". Where does power come from? For some, it is a birthright. We say of Senator Ted Kennedy that he was born to a powerful family. And what he does with that birthright either increases or diminishes his power. Some people earn their power by achieving a place of prominence in our society. There are many kinds of power and different ways of earning it.

But the power St. Paul exemplified was the power of an extraordinary purpose...a man with a mission...the mission of bringing persons to the life of Christ. Anyone who is driven by a mission will be a person of power.

Raise a hand if you're old enough to remember Eleanor Roosevelt. She arrived at the seat of power as a president's wife, but her power was much more pronounced than that of any other First Lady in this century. Some of you may remember that Mrs. Roosevelt was a "one-woman" war on poverty during the Depression years of the thirties. She visited coal mines and hospitals and squatters' camps all over the country. She traveled around the world.... speaking with kings and presidents and the destitute with equal enthusiasm and compassion. During her husband's presidency, she acted as unofficial ambassador to the world and devil's advocate to his conscience and the conscience of a nation. She achieved all of this in spite of the fact that she waspainfully shy.

After the death of her husband in the mid-forties and with no official capacity, Mrs. Roosevelt continued to be a spokes-person for dozens of causes. When President Truman appointed her to the newly formed United Nations, Henry Cabot Lodge gave her what was considered an "inconsequential committee" concerned with human rights. Lodge did not realize that he had given Mrs. Roosevelt the perfect platform from which to launch a world-wide fight for fairness and equality.

At first, I remember that she was ignored and minimized. Every place she turned, she encountered barriers that would have discouraged a less passionate and committed person. She cajoled and compromised. She pleaded and she demanded. Everyone with whom she came in contact felt the power of her convictions. Her work on the "Bill of Human Rights" for the newly formed United Nations came to fruition after four years of tough and faithful effort. To date, this document that bears her imprint has been used as the basis for the constitutions of sixty nations. Eleanor Roosevelt was on a mission and later this month as we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, let us remember this woman who made a major difference in our world.

If you and I are not as powerful as we ought to be, maybe it is because we have no mission burning in our soul. God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and He has also given us a spirit of love.

LOVE It is love that ought to always be the focus of our mission and beware of that person who is on a mission that is not driven by love. Paul knew about the dangers of such a mission for after all....in the early years of his very own life, he was on a mission to destroy the small Christian community that was forming in Jerusalem. But then, there came that day when he met up with Christ in a moving and powerful way, and he found a mission not of persecution but of redemption. What a wondrous gift a person can give the world when LOVE and POWER are linked together. Love and power...linked together. Loveless power versus powerless love. It is the latter that makes the differencepowerless love, not loveless power.

SELF-DISCIPLINE

But one thing more is needed, says St. Paul and that one thing is self-discipline.

Isn't it sad when you see a person in a position of power who lacks self-discipline? That is not a political statement. It is a statement of faith, love and much sadness. How many men and women who have so much to offer to our world...stumble because they cannot put their personal house in order?

I am told that in one of the great cities of Russia there is a magnificent equestrian statue of Peter the Great with his hand uplifted.... pointing his nation toward the sea. He was truly one of the great rulers of his country and helped to mould modern Russia. But he was subject to maniacal outbursts of fury and rage, in one of which he killed his own son. Toward the end of his life, Peter the Great, said:

"I have conquered an empire....but I was not able to conquer myself....."

How sad. Indeed, how very sad. Just as power without love is dangerous, so too, power without self-discipline is fleeting. How do we find self-discipline? We do it just as Paul did it by putting our lives under the control and the influence of Christ.

We look beyond ourselves to the One who is the very source of perfect power - which includes power over ourselves. It is found at the altar of the Church. We here link our lives to His. We bring our lives under His control and as we do then we discover His power, His love, His discipline.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your presence in these moments, O God.... sensitive to Your peace and lifting power. Touch with healing those whom we mention in the privacy of our thoughts and hearts this hour. You know them by name...they are:

Franklin Keysar. Susan Langley. Jim Randall.
Charles Scardino. Warren Leopold. Larry Henry.
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Help us to take this word of Paul to young Timothy to heart and to bring our lives under the influence and touch of Jesus Christ, our Lord....He knows His sheep by name and gently calls them home to Himself. Amen.

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