

Anxiety

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

19 May, 2024

Children's Talk: Two Kinds of Fear

On the same day, when evening had come, He said to them, "Let us cross over to the other side." Now when they had left the multitude, they took Him along in the boat as He was. And other little boats were also with Him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling. But He was in the stern, asleep on a pillow. And they awoke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?"

Then He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace, be still!" And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. But He said to them, "Why are you so fearful? How *is it* that you have no faith?" And they feared exceedingly, and said to one another, "Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!" (Mark 4:35-41)

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One of the most oft-repeated commands in the Word is “Do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid. Fear not. Have faith. Trust. And yet we do. We fear for the safety of our children and loved ones, for the future of our country, for our own safety and security and wellbeing. We fear the judgments of others and the challenges of living in a complicated world. Another term we could use is anxiety. We are anxious and we live in an anxious world. Sometimes the anxiety is justified: there are real threats, real risks that we face every day; and the ones that are imagined feel no less real: the anxiety that seems to have no source but keeps you up at night, afraid of... something.

So if we feel anxiety, we feel that fear in our gut and in our body, does that mean we are disobeying God? Are we breaking His commandment, “do not be afraid!” When we feel anxiety it can feel like a failure of faith and trust. And it may even be a kind of failure... but that is an oversimplification of something incredibly complicated. There is more nuance than that in how faith and fear interact.

We turn now to a story about fear and trust. It has to do with the Disciple Peter. Any time we read about Peter in the Word we can know that the subject will be faith. Peter stands for faith. Not just perfect faith, and in fact, more often than not, messy, broken, failing faith. Here is the story, from the Gospel of Matthew:

Now in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went to them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out for fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid.” And Peter answered Him and said, “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.” So He said, “Come.” And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was

boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!"

And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

Then those who were in the boat came and worshiped Him, saying, "Truly You are the Son of God." (Matthew 14:25-33)

Notice that this is not a simple story of being afraid, then trusting, and having the faith dispense the fear. At first they see what they think is a ghost, and they are afraid; but then He tells them to not be afraid, it is only Jesus; and Peter still doubts somewhat, so he asks for a sign; even so he trusted enough to step out the boat, trusting that the Lord would enable him to walk on the water; but even though he showed that amazing trust, his fear overcame him when he saw the wind, and he began to sink, calling out to the Lord in desperation; the Lord then reached out and saved him, and brought him back safely into the boat, where they worshipped Him.

Notice that it is not a story of going from fear to trust, the end. The fear and the trust move back and forth, they intertwine as the story progresses. Or another way of looking at it is that they can both exist and grow or diminish alongside each other. A feeling of anxiety and faith in the Lord are not mutually exclusive. Peter trusted the Lord enough to step out onto the water; yet only a moment later his fear nearly sank him. Perhaps the greatest example of this juxtaposition is seen in the life of Jesus Himself: the culmination of His work was on the Cross; and yet in that moment He spoke these words: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). He had needed incredible trust in His own Divine power to face even death; and yet in Himself He experienced agonizing distress and abandonment.

What we're seeing here is the juxtaposition of a felt fear and a deeper love, and they relate to each other closely. It's not actually a coincidence that they go

together. The Teachings of the New Church explain that all love will inherently have something of fear attached to it.

The fear of love is a fear of injuring the Lord in any way, or of injuring the neighbour in any way, thus of injuring what is good and true in any way, and consequently of injuring the sacred things of love and faith and the consequent worship. But this fear is various, and is not the same with one person as with another. Speaking generally, the greater the amount of the love of good and truth, the greater the fear of injuring them; and yet in the same proportion this fear does not appear to be fear. (*Secrets of Heaven* §3781)

The greater the love that someone has, the greater is the fear that some harm might come to that which is loved. What are some of the things that bring on the most anxiety? Threats to your children's future; threats to your husband or wife; threats to your community. These extend to the spiritual level: the fear that you may be betrayed by your husband or wife shows a love for your marriage; the fear that you might be a bad mom or dad shows a love for your children; the fear that you might not be good enough, shows a fear of being a certain kind and quality of person. Even superficial anxieties can point to a love: the fear of public speaking touches on your love for what people think of you, the fear of heights speaks to a love of life and safety. It is true that some anxiety comes simply from a physical reaction in your body; but many, many instances of anxiety touch back on some love. And once again, the greater the love, the greater will the fear and anxiety be that some harm should come to it.

So if that is the case, what can the Lord mean by the command not to be afraid? What can we actually do with this? The goal is that we should not be controlled by the anxiety, but rather find freedom. When we are fearful and anxious we can easily become controlled. One way this happens is paralysis. I know that when I am anxious I incline to shut down. Tasks that once were easy become impossible. It feels vulnerable to move even. Other people have an outburst of

anger, erupting into rage or yelling. Psychologically there is a flight, fight, faint, or fawn response; and this response kicks in whether we like it or not. This is the side that in many ways we cannot control.

But we can work to be free. Even in the context of these anxious feelings we can find the strength to make better choices. Even when I feel paralyzed by anxiety, I need to take the first steps to put my choices into motion. Someone who shows anxiety in rage needs to choose not to yell or turn violent. Those who would flee need to choose to confront their challenges. A people pleaser will need to make demands of others. All of these choices can be supported in a number of ways, that are useful tools from the world of psychology. One thing that won't necessarily help is the thought, "I need to get rid of my anxiety so that I can make better choices." Often times the mind-set would rather be, "I need to make better choices in spite of my anxiety." Courage is not the absence of fear; it is to feel fear and to carry on anyway.

It's one thing to say we just need to make better choices; much harder to put it into action. But there is a source of power that is available to us even when we are struggling with spiritual anxiety. We are never without access to the Lord's power. If we go back to the story of Peter, Peter had the courage to step out onto the water; but when he began to drown it was only through the Lord reaching out His arm and lifting him up that he was saved. This presence of the Lord is with us no matter how dark our anxieties may be. The Teachings of the New Church explain that even in the worst spiritual struggles, the worst temptations, God is more present than at any other time:

So long as temptation continues, the person supposes the Lord to be absent, because he is troubled by evil genii so severely that sometimes he is reduced to despair, and can scarcely believe there is any God. Yet the Lord is then more closely present than he can ever believe. (*Secrets of Heaven* §840)

The sure knowledge that there is a God who is ensuring that every last thing that happens can lead to a good end, that His plan is greater than anything that could possibly go wrong; the point is not to use this to remove the anxiety, but to lean into this idea so that you can make choices in spite of the anxiety.

We can sometimes draw on that power easily. Sometimes with great difficulty. And at times apparently not at all. One route into that power is through the love that we fear for. When we love things that are good and true, that love is coming directly from the Lord, and there is power in it. By reflecting on and focusing on that motivating love we can tap into the Lord's love.

But just doing that is not enough. We need to take a step. Just like Peter had to step off the boat, just like Jesus had to confront His accusers, we have to take action, and do so before the fear is gone. That might look something like this: I am anxious; I am anxious because I'm terrified that I cannot cope with life; that I am alone and will be alone for forever. I know that God is with me; I know that He is close by; I know that He loves me; I know He is in charge; I know all of these things to be true; but still I am afraid. So I will do what I need to do, knowing that the Lord will give me the power to do it; I will call who I need to call; I will say no to what I need to say no to; I will do the tasks that I have committed to do. And whatever happens, whether I succeed or fail, I know that the Lord is with me, and will bring good out of whatever comes next.

There may be times when adopting that mind-set softens the anxiety. And there may be times when it actually heightens it. But all those statements about the Lord are true. All you need to do is take the next step. By taking that step you have faith and trust, no matter how great your fear may be.