

“The Fears that Haunt Us”

Psalm 27

The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 28 February 2010

One of the marvelous things about aging is that you have experiences that inform who you are becoming – sometimes very difficult learning experiences – but they afford some wisdom along the way. I would imagine that some of you who have been around for sixty or seventy or eighty or ninety years have had the experience of being deathly afraid of something and in the process of living your life, have vanquished that fear.

Spend a moment if you will and thing with me about a time in your life when you have been afraid to do something and then overcame that fear. It doesn't matter whether you are a grandparent or whether you're an elementary school student. Perhaps you were afraid of an exam or perhaps you were fearful of flying or maybe you were afraid of public speaking. Just take a moment and remember what that fear felt like. What do you sense in your body about that fear? What part of your body becomes tense when you think about that, or in which part of your body do you feel that fear? And now, take a deep breath and think of how you overcame that fear. Release the tension in your body and remember how did you found the courage to confront that sense of fear and then move beyond it. How did you conquer that specter of fear that haunted you and turn it away? We all have been able to do that, and we all will continue to have that ability. When you think of overcoming your fear, imagine that fear and its shadowy recesses being bathed in light . . . the light of God which illumines all things. And as you are finished thinking about overcoming your fear, offer a prayer of thanks to God for being with you and for shedding light on your darkest fear.

I don't know the experience that you just contemplated, but I know about an experience that I grew up with, and I'll share it with you. When I was growing up, my biggest fear was that my father would die. He had had a very serious heart attack when was 12, and I worried constantly as a teenager that he would have a fatal heart attack. Whenever the phone would ring in the classroom, that's where my mind raced: that they were calling to tell me that my dad had died. It really was like a specter that hung over my head through my teen years. I had never had someone close to me die, and I didn't know how I could possibly handle that. When my father did have a fatal heart attack, when I was 26, it was a very difficult transition to experience, of course, for our whole family. But, the amazing thing to me was that I *survived* the experience. I had invested so much emotional effort in thinking about it, ruminating about it, and worrying about it, that I made the fear larger than life. It haunted me until it actually happened, and then I moved through it, which exorcised the fear.

There is a difference between fear and anxiety. Fear is a reasonable sense of being afraid of something or someone or some condition; it has an object. Anxiety is a more free-floating sense of generic dread. And, of course, it can range into paranoia. (Though, as Woody Allen once said, “Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean that people **aren't** out to get you!”)

And some fears keep us from doing stupid things and dying. For instance, it is not unreasonable to fear rattlesnakes and to avoid them while you're hiking. Those common-sense fears, are not what I'm talking about this morning. It's the fears that dominate our thinking, the fears that haunt us or keep us from growing into the people God intends us to become in our fullness.

Most of you have heard of Paul Tillich, but how many of you have actually read anything he wrote? (Amazingly, I got through divinity school without reading Tillich or Reinhold Niebuhr!) Some of it can be pretty tough sledding, but his sermons are brilliant, and some of his shorter books, like *The Dynamics of Faith* and *The Courage to Be* are well worth reading.

I should give you a little bit of background on this man who, along with Niebuhr, were the real giants of twentieth century American theology (and both made the cover of *Time* magazine...those were the days!) Tillich was born in Germany and was an ordained minister who served as a chaplain in the German army during the First World War. After the war, he taught on several university faculties in Germany until 1933, when his opposition to Nazism resulted in his dismissal, and it was then that Reinhold Niebuhr invited Tillich to join the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York. Tillich taught there for many years, then at Harvard Divinity School, and finally at the University of Chicago. And one of the things I only recently discovered was that he, like Niebuhr, was UCC.

In *The Courage to Be*, Tillich talks about three fundamental fears. (Tillich calls them anxieties, and distinguishes them from neurotic anxiety, but fear and anxiety are closely related, so I will address them as fears, because I think that we can concretize them as such.)

The fear of non-being is essentially the fear of **death**. That is a fairly reasonable thing on the surface. We have an innate instinct to live, and a healthy sense of fear about dying keeps us alive. My question for you is when does our fear of death cross the line from being healthy self-preservation and become a force that holds us back and controls our lives? In short, when does it become a fear that haunts us?

Tillich outlines a second anxiety, a fear that I think is terribly widespread among us: the fear of **meaninglessness**. Some of us have work or home lives that basically sap the life energy from us. In his book, *Anam Cara*, John O'Donohue writes about work as a "poetics of growth."¹ We want to have fulfilling careers and home lives and relationships, but the reality is sometimes different and leaves us wondering what whether there is any meaning at all in our lives. That can lead to a huge pit of despair.

The third fear that Tillich enunciates is a fear of guilt or **condemnation**. How many of us are afraid to take the steps in our own lives to become fully integrated human beings because we are worried about being judged by parents, spouses, or children? I know that we in the UCC are supposed to have less guilt than our sisters and brothers in the Jewish and Catholic traditions, but my mom could have given any Jewish mother a run for her money. "How many people does it take to help my mother change a light bulb?" ... "Never mind, I'll just sit in the dark." But, seriously, how many of us became lawyers or dentists because our parents expected us to? I remember the worst thing my parents could say to me was not that they were angry with me, but, "We're very disappointed in you." And there are still walls around my own acceptance of myself, because I'm afraid of being judged harshly. How many African-American kids are afraid to "act smart" because they think they will be condemned by their peers for "acting white?" (Please, God, let them see President Obama!)

So, Tillich's three outlined fears are **death**, **meaninglessness**, and **condemnation**. What fears have shut down parts of your life and kept you from living into the fullness of your humanity? And where do those fears come from? Aren't some of them "ancient issues" that you could have dealt with a long time ago?

Too often, the church universal is an agent of repression, rather than an agent of liberation, and I am inviting us to let go of the fears that haunt us. (I'd almost like to have

¹ John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara*. (NY: HarperCollins, 1998) , p. xix

an altar call to invite us to come forward and release some of the old fears that keep us from being who the integrated and whole persons God wishes us to be. And even if you don't want to come forward, I invite you into a time of healing and letting go of your fears.)

Tillich writes something beautiful, though he's a philosopher not a poet, which touched me deeply (and part of it is because on some deep level, I sometimes feel less-than-acceptable as a human being): "He who is unacceptable is accepted...the victory over the anxiety of guilt and condemnation is sharply expressed. One could say that the courage to be is the courage to accept oneself as accepted in spite of being unacceptable."²

Truly, the point in all of this is made clear by the psalmist: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" If we know deeply, viscerally, that we are accepted and loved by God, then we don't need to fear death; we don't need to fear that our lives are emptiness; we don't need to worry about what other people think. "If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up." How many gay and lesbian kids get kicked out of the family, and how many churches are willing to say to them, "You are God's beloved?"

The psalmist doesn't suggest that it's going to be a bed of roses as we walk through life, and he doesn't promise pie in the sky when you die, rather he expresses confidence in God in this life: "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." Look around you and see that God is good! And when the going gets tough, "Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!"

I want to close with words from Tillich's sermon, "You Are Accepted." And my prayer is that we each can let these words resonate in our hearts, at the very depth of our being:

"You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted! If that happens to us, we experience grace."³

Amen.

² Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*. (New Haven: Yale, 1952), p. 164.

³ quoted in Tillich, *op. cit.*, p. xxii.