

John 20: 19-22

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.

1 John 4: 18-21

¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Trinity Presbyterian Church April 15, 2018

“Faithful Resistance #2: Love in an Era of Fear”

“Lock the doors.”

It is what my mother would remind my father to do just before he turned in for the night. “Don’t forget,” she’d say with a smile, “We don’t want to wake up to an unexpected house guest.”

Lock the doors.

It is our habitual liturgy whenever we step out of our cars, clicking the car remote button again and again until we hear that little chirp which sets our minds at ease.

“Lock the doors.”

It is the advice churches are given these days to discourage an active shooter from entering the building. “After worship begins, give it five or so minutes—make certain you have a Door Greeter by the door just in case somebody comes in late!—but lock the doors.” Whoever thought churches in 2018 would feel the need to lock their doors as they worshipped? Of course, this raises a whole new set of questions:

“What messages do locked doors send to our guests and communities?”

“Can we continue to claim that we are an ‘Open Door Church’?”

And then there is the question our text today raises: “Can love and fear co-exist—can we be a people who witness to God’s love while continuing to ‘lock the doors’ in fear?”

Well, it is hard not to, isn’t it? It’s hard not to be afraid these days. Fear knocks and our first response is to twist the deadbolts. Especially when soundbites from the news send fear frequencies tumbling through our imaginations. Threats spilling in from Russia and North Korea

and then interviews with experts who speak about nuclear weapons aimed at our soil, our people. Especially when social media in real time inundates us with one terrorizing story right after the other. Stories about a cruel, violent and unsafe world. Especially when we read in the paper about a woman who is jumped on her way to her car in a parking lot. We can't help but begin to look over our shoulder, fearing the stranger on the sidewalk who is probably just taking a nightly stroll. But then again it is better to be safe than sorry. Fear comes. Impulsively. Viscerally. Naturally. It is difficult not to jump the gun when fear comes knocking. So, "Lock the doors," we say. "Lock the doors."

Except something inside of us knows: this can't be the way to live. We've seen what happens when unchecked fear spreads to us, to them. We've watched amazing people being labeled in permanent marker as a "terrorist" because of their religion; or beloved friends tattooed a "trouble-maker" at an early age because of the color of their skin. We've witnessed fear's pathogens take over entire societies and seep into well-intended religion. How many of us have experienced the threat of going to hell for what we believed or refused to believe; because of who we are, or who we are not? Religion becoming a minion for hell's agenda: to push us into locked closets and keep us paralyzed in silence. We've witnessed with misty eyes how a nation seized by fear can lock down its borders in the name of national security. Turning away boatloads of starving refugees who seek nothing more than to find peace for their families. This week we remember the Holocaust: their boney hairless bodies, the terrors of the concentration camps, and a nation's complacent churches who couldn't see the fear beyond their own noses. We have watched what fear drives us to do. Something deep in our hearts knows: fear is where we might start, but it can't be where we stay. Truly, this cannot be the way to live.

So what do we do when we hear scripture's sacred words, "Perfect love casts out fear?" What do we do when we hear that love is being perfected in us even during these trembling times? The word for "perfect" here is the Greek word, *telios*. *Telios* does not mean we are "Masters of Love" or that we get it right every time. *Telios* means there is a trajectory of our love that is in line with how God loves us. If you've ever stood in the *telios* of God's love you may have felt like the anxiety waned and, for a moment, you could finally catch your breath. If you've ever been aligned with the *telios* of God's love you may have realized that the voice of judgement in your life isn't God's voice at all. If you've ever experienced being in the *telios* of God's love you may have felt fear's grip loosen as we sang today, "We are not afraid...We shall overcome someday." Singing that song reminds me that in the final couple years of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life, he developed a severe tick when he preached. He would stutter through speeches, having to repeat words and sentences. But one day the stuttering stopped. So a friend asked him what he had done to get rid of it. Dr. King said he had made his peace with death. If you've ever known anyone who has made their peace with death, you could probably see them standing in the bright *telios* of God's love.

You should know, beloved people, that all of this takes a good bit of faith. Faith formed by belonging to a loving community. Faith formed by being in love's presence when we pray. A

faith saturated in our baptismal promise that reminds us we don't belong to fear, but to God. When I was a youngster we lived by a fairly remote lake. By the shoreline was a large oak tree with one of those heavy-duty ropes that was looped around a massive branch that swung out over the waters. We'd climb the tree, grab the rope, and jump off one of the branches screaming "Geronimo" as we'd sail out over the lake. Once over the waters we'd let go; our bodies clawing through the air until the deep waters below caught us. One day a friend grabbed the rope, jumped off the tree's branch and swung out over the waters, except he didn't let go. We all thought he was screaming "Geronimo!" But it turns out he was screaming, "I can't let go!" "Come on, let go!" we'd yell, but he would just cling to the rope tighter saying, "I can't, I can't!" So he swung back and forth like a statue for a while until the pendulum of the rope eventually stopped. His knees locked over the rope's knot, his knuckles trembling ghost white. I don't think I've ever seen a more petrified soul.

One day, when fear knocks on the door we will have to make the choice. Do we lock the door, or does faith answer it? Do we keep clinging to the rope? Or do we let go, allowing the deep waters of God's love to catch us?