

This summer will mark, I think, the 20<sup>th</sup> year I'll have the privilege of accompanying a group of high school youth as we go to do home repair projects in a low-income, Native American community. Last year we were in Tsaile, AZ. This year our SSP site is Chiloquin, OR. SSP, which stands for *Sierra Service Project*, is a Christian non-profit organization which facilitates these service opportunities to give youth an experience of serving in an unfamiliar place, and with people who have a very different culture and background.

When we arrive on site this year, adults and teens from St. Paul's will break into teams with adults and teens from other churches. Each work team typically includes no more than 3 people from a participating church, so that we build a wider community in service together.

Over the years, different experiences have stood out for me. A few years ago, I was the lucky adult who had one of the most stellar teams of youth I'd ever had on a work team. These kids were really special. As our team of 8 youth and 2 adults got to know each other, we really bonded.

On our last evening together, we had a chance to do a final exercise, answering a few reflection questions. I don't recall the question that triggered it, but I sat stunned, listening to these teens talk about their deepest fears and anxieties. ***Not a single one of them expressed hope about their future!*** It was all anxiety! And mostly about their education. (This was not the kind of dramatic one-upmanship that sometimes occurs when teens talk together! Their anxiety was as real as the tears they began to shed.)

For incoming freshmen, it was fear about High School. For the sophomores it was anxiety over their intense schedules of honors and AP classes (and whether they could do as well as their parents expected). For the juniors it was the anxiety of prepping for SAT's and taking more AP classes. For the seniors it was whether they'd get into the college of their choice. For all of them, there was pressure about keeping up with their rigorous classes and doing all of the extracurricular activities that might beef up their college applications!

For almost all of them, it was worry about getting enough scholarship and financial assistance so they'd not overburden their parents; or have to select a lesser college. For one of the seniors, it was fear he'd done so poorly already that he'd sabotaged his future!

It was devastating to listen to. Because these were truly remarkable young people. Articulate, kind, helpful, giving, accomplished... I mean, here they were,

spending a week serving as the hands and feet of Jesus! But chock full of fear, worry, and anxiety that their B in AP Chemistry might do permanent damage; that their SAT score should've been 100 points higher to give them a shot of getting into their first-choice college.

It was so painful to listen to this. And I couldn't help but think that these kids were actually carrying the overwhelming weight of ***their parents' fears and concerns***; at 15, 16, and 17 years old!

...

This morning we're kicking off a 6-week series called: *UnAfraid: Living with Courage and Hope*. This morning I'm going to share some basic information about the physiology of fear, and we'll begin to consider some of the resources we have, as Christians, to 'faith our fears.' Over the course of the next few Sundays we'll spend time looking at our fear of 'the other', of being alone, of failure, and our fears that the sky is falling. 5 weeks from today we'll conclude by looking at our fears around sickness, aging, and death.

...

Let's begin with me pretending to know something about the brain! If you take your right hand, and do a sort of 'scout' salute, we are going to use our hand as a brain model. Here at the top of the fingers would be the *middle prefrontal cortex*, and your thumb would represent the *limbic* regions of the brain: the *hippocampus* and the *amygdala*. Now, if you wrap your fingers over your thumb this looks more like your brain. The *middle prefrontal cortex* is now here, wrapped around your *hippocampus* and *amygdala*. The *cerebral cortex* is here, around the exterior of your fist, which would be at your face. At the base of your hand is the *brainstem*, and then starting down the wrist would be the *spinal cord*.<sup>1</sup> It is the limbic region, deep within the brain, that works closely with the brainstem and body to create not only our basic drives, but also our emotions.

"Is this good or is this bad?" is the most basic question the limbic area is concerned with. Before our conscious mind can make any rational sense of things we've heard, seen, felt, smelled, or tasted, the limbic system is making an early determination as to whether what our 5 senses have detected is a potential threat. And if it's perceived as a threat, the *amygdala* activates our body's early warning system, releasing chemicals like epinephrine and cortisol, things that are meant to help save our lives if we're in danger! That our bodies and brains are created in such an intricate and effective way, reminds me of the Psalmist praising God: that we "are so fearfully and

---

<sup>1</sup> Siegel, Daniel J., MD *Mindsight. The New Science of Personal Transformation*. Bantam Books. New York. 2011. p. 15

wonderfully made!” (Another translation, the GWT -- which I use for devotional reading -- renders Psalm 134:14 this way, “I will give thanks to you because I have been so amazingly and miraculously made!”)

As amazingly as we’ve been made, it’s important to know that the *amygdala* is totally risk-averse. Like a neurotic helicopter parent, its job is to identify risks, swoop in, and protect you from any danger. The job of the *amygdala* is to consider the worst and keep you from doing anything that might adversely impact your well-being. This can truly be a blessing. It can even save your life; but it can also keep you from living.<sup>2</sup>

The *amygdala* can keep you from living by misreading the signals, causing us to worry, over-read, or overreact to threats that are not realistic. (For example, when a student gets a 2 instead of a 3 or 4 on an AP exam, they might fear their parents’ reaction and can feel like their college dreams and whole future have been shattered. And really, at a physiological level it can feel as overwhelming as nearly being hit by a car. The difference is that nearly being hit by a car is truly life threatening. Scoring a 2 on an AP exam is not! But the *amygdala* activates chemicals that make these two different things feel the same!)

...

We recently launched a 12-Step Bible Study here at St. Paul’s on Thursday nights. People who are involved in 12-Step recovery begin to learn a number of helpful terms, slogans, and acronyms. One of these is an acronym for the word FEAR, which stands for: False Evidence Appearing Real. This acronym identifies our propensity to catastrophize about the future, based on ‘false evidence which appears real!’

I am one of those who has to remind myself not to *live into the wreckage of my future* because I’m talented when it comes to imagining all the worst possible outcomes that could materialize to ruin my life! (Truth? You have no idea how stressed I was about doing 3 Easter services this year: wondering if the choir and praise band would end up wanting to crucify me for asking so much of them for no good reason, if people did not show up in droves! And then of course, they’d totally want a new minister to replace me! And I’d have to move my family and we’d end up in who knows where; maybe Corona.)

...

So, if God designed our brain’s limbic system to protect us from harm, we need to be grateful because it works so

well! (I remember one situation having to get out of a car on the street side of where we’d parked. My daughter, a toddler, didn’t see an oncoming bus. My limbic system went into split-second action helping me grab her arm and yank her from harm’s way in the nick of time!) But we also need to develop our capacity to address both healthy and unhealthy responses to fears that are threatening and fears that are rooted in false evidence appearing real.

Over 140 times the words, “Do not be afraid,” in one form or another, appear in scripture. Both readings this morning are on this theme: but both talk about overcoming fear by giving it over to God. Psalm 56:3: “when I am afraid, I put my trust in you.”

In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew shares Jesus’ teachings on fear and worry in 6:25-34, counselling us to not worry about things that are out of our hands and out of our control. After saying, in v. 27, that worry seldom does us any real good, Jesus concludes in v. 34 saying, “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” Now, I happen to believe that if Jesus taught something like this, it is because it is actually possible for us to do; to not borrow trouble by fretting over tomorrow.

But notice! Jesus isn’t saying “Don’t worry, be happy” or “hakuna matata”. His teaching is much more reality based! Worry generally focuses our energy and attention on the past (‘I wish hadn’t done that, or I wish I hadn’t said that, or I wish I’d never been born’); or worry focuses our energy on the future (“What if this or that happens if I do or don’t make a certain decision?”) Jesus calls us into the present, the only “time” we can directly affect, and use to meet with our God.

So, in the midst of worry and concern, we need to develop our capacity and practice paying attention to God. I have two tools I want to offer up for this. The first is that we need to recognize when we are being overwhelmed by a spirit of fear, that is not from God. 1 Tim. 1:6 reminds us, “God does not give a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of self-control.” What this means is that if we are feeling fear, it’s not from God, it’s coming from another source. And once we recognize this, we don’t have to figure out how to address that ‘spirit of fear’ on our own, which is nearly impossible! We ask God for God’s spirit to replace our spirit of fear.

One prayer tool I’ve used is reciting the first line of Psalm 46:10, “Be still and know that I am God.” At one point, I was deployed to a new church and discovered a serious financial issue that hadn’t been disclosed to me.

---

<sup>2</sup> Hamilton, Adam. *Unafraid*. Convergent. New York. 2018. pp.22-23

For about 3 months, repeating the words of Psalm 46:10 for 15 to 20 minutes every morning was basically my whole prayer life! My anxiety dissipated and God helped me to address the situation by focusing on the present. I hope and pray that some of what I've shared today truly helps you to begin to develop the capacity to live Unafraid, with courage and hope. Next week, we'll look at how we address our "Fear of the Other." I hope to see you then.