

“Trust that leads to service”
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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
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Revelation 7: 9 - 17

9After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. 10They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

11And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

13Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” 14I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

15 For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

16 They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;

17 for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Matthew 23: 1 - 12

1Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; 3therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 4They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. 5They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. 6They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, 7and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. 8But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. 9And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father — the one in heaven. 10Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11The greatest among you will be your servant. 12All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

When I was pregnant with Sarah Allan, I worried a lot. I had a normal pregnancy and everything was fine, I just couldn't help myself. I worried. All the time. That I would do something wrong or that something beyond my control would go wrong.

And I cannot tell you how many times I thought, to myself and probably out loud to the amusement of others, that if she could just get born and be healthy that this worry would be over and we could get about the business of living our lives.

I don't need to tell you what happened. Her safe and healthy arrival in this world was just the beginning. Just the beginning of the worry.

My mother will tell you I'm a professional worrier. That she never feels the need to worry because she knows I'm doing it for her. And she's not all wrong.

My worry, as I've learned in more recent years through taking a closer look at it emotionally and psychologically, is more often than not born of a desire for things to go a particular way. For my life to BE a particular way. Healthy. Happy. Prosperous. Faithful to my calling.

Worry comes because of the perception that, the mis-perception that, if things aren't right, I'm not right.

I have a feeling Jesus might be preaching to me, today.

For finding security in when things are right. Or good. Or successful. For finding my security in these things. Not because those things are bad, but because they aren't the point.

Jesus is calling out the religious elites in this passage, not because they are wrong- he actually grants them the authority of sitting on the seat of Moses- but because they've missed the point.

Security isn't to be found in the assurance of titles or robes or making sure you have just the right picture for your Christmas card or your children were well behaved at church or nobody saw the meltdown you had in the grocery store parking lot because ice cream got spilled all over the back seat.

We aren't loved by God because we give or serve or do the right things, it's being open to the love of God that teaches us how to give and serve and do the right things.

Our stewardship theme for this year is fearless generosity. Not blind generosity, but fearless, faithful generosity. A generosity of spirit that refuses to cede space to fear.

When I began studying this year's theme what immediately came to mind was the one I tell in the stewardship packet, the story of John Wesley on the high seas, where he was travelling with two groups, the Moravians (Germans) and everyone else. This is what he wrote about when a storm hit and threatened to sink their ship.

"Every ten minutes came a shock (from the high seas) against the stern or side of the ship, which one would think should dash the planks to pieces.... At seven I went to the Germans. I had long before observed the great seriousness of their behavior. Of their humility they had given a continual proof, by performing those servile offices for the other passengers, which none of the English would undertake; for which they desired, and would receive no pay, saying, "it was good for their proud hearts," and "their loving Savior had done more for them." And every day had given them occasion of showing a meekness which no injury could move. If they were pushed, struck, or thrown down, they rose again and went away; but no complaint was found in their mouth. There was now an opportunity of trying whether they were delivered from the spirit of fear, as well as from that of pride, anger, and revenge. In the midst of the psalm wherewith their service began, the sea broke over, split the main-sail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans calmly sung on. I asked one of them afterwards, "Were you not afraid?" He answered, "I thank God, no." I asked, "But were not your women and children afraid?" He replied, mildly, "No; our women and children are not afraid to die."¹

I think that's what Jesus is talking about to the religious elites of his day. He's telling them that if they want to get closer to the heart of God, they need to get closer to their own hearts, closer to the hearts of others. They need to see the Christ in the other and the Christ in themselves. They need to serve, the service that leads to a faithful trust.

We see that service that leads to trust on the Sunday each year when we hear about the youth's mission trip. That one week out of the year where they learn- and it's often not glamorous at all- about Jesus and themselves.

And about how it isn't something we can learn in one week, one week is just the beginning of that daily practice of setting aside the fear that keeps us from trust, keeps us from service, keeps us from generosity.

In the third Harry Potter movie, the Prisoner of Azkaban the students learn about Boggarts. A Boggart is a shape-shifting creature that will assume the form of whatever most frightens the person who encounters it. Ron Weasley sees a spider, Padma Patil a snake, Neville Longbottom Professor Snape,² and Harry a Dementor.

¹ <http://www.ccel.org/w/wesley/journal/journal.htm>

LindaJo H. McKim, *The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993. Page 205.



But here's the thing. They aren't real. They are waiting to be put into their place. With one spell, Riddikulus, they are rendered ridiculous, silly, laughable. Fear is put into its place.

Now, fear is not without its uses. Fear keeps us from walking off of mountains. Of knowing when we need to turn around and walk the other way.

But fear also keeps us from living the lives God wants us to live. Keeps the church from being the church of Jesus Christ.

If you could banish one fear from your life, which one would it be? And what might God replace it with?

For me, one of the places where my fears surface is when Ben and I go to fill out my pledge card. When I look at the 10% figure and worry if we'll be able to make it this year. Will there be enough? Will we be able to do everything that we want to do and give away that 10%?

The truth of it is, of course, that we can't. There are things we can't have and things we can't do because of what we choose.

What we learn, each and every year, though, is that it's not the portion that we give away that we miss. It's that portion that teaches us everything we need to know about gratitude and plenty and enough. And in some ways that 10% is far more important than the 90%.

Where, in your own life, could you put into practice some of that fearless generosity?

One of the hymns John Wesley heard the Moravians sing on that ship as it was battered and tossed by the waves was a hymn written by Lutheran pastor Paul Gearhardt in the mid-17th century, and in devotion to what he had learned on the seas Wesley later translated it into English. We're singing it later today.³

It reminds us that in a world in which fear and worry seek to take control of our lives, that if we hold so tight to fear and worry that we won't be able to open our hands and hold fast to the one who always holds fast to us.

Give to the winds thy fears;
 Hope and be undismayed:
 God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears,
 God shall lift up thy head.

³ https://hymnary.org/text/give_to_the_winds_thy_fears