

An Overcoat in July

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me...” (PSALM 23:4 NIV)

What do you fear? Are you afraid of the dark; afraid to walk the streets at night? Maybe you're even afraid to walk the streets in broad daylight: feeling the hair rise on the back of your neck each time you approach an alley, wondering if some thug might leap out and assault you. Some people fear death. Some fear life.

I Remember a telephone call from Mary in Claremore, Oklahoma. By the sound of her voice I could tell she was quite upset. She said, “They're trying to break into my house.” She wasn't clear about who “they” were, and she said the police had been out, but didn't do anything. I called the police and the one who answered the phone said, “Oh, yes. We know Mary. She basically said Mary was a “crazy old woman” who was a pest.

I agreed to go to her home, prepared to encounter a unique character; but I was not prepared enough. She was a retired “Top Sergeant” in the Army, and she greeted me wearing a military helmet, flak jacket and combat boots. Before the door opened I heard lock after lock being thrown, and when I walked into her living room I turned and counted eleven deadbolts on the front door.

Around her neck she wore two necklaces: one of padlocks, the other of keys. She had packed all her earthly possessions into cardboard boxes and stacked them in a network of trenches and bunkers through the house. They surrounded her bed, her refrigerator and her cooking stove. I felt, almost, as if I were back in Vietnam surrounded by sandbags. The windows were covered with black plastic sheeting, and somewhere I could hear the crackling static and muffled voices of a police scanner.

Well, Mary certainly represents an extreme example of fear—even paranoia; still, she reminds us that fear is a dominant characteristic of our culture today. And there's a lot to fear: some people fear financial collapse—the loss of material possessions; some fear growing old—facing illness, loneliness.

Parents fear their kids might get hooked on drugs or get pregnant; and the epidemic of school shootings leaves parents uneasy just sending their kids to school every morning.

And kids? More than anything else in the world, kids fear two things: (1) anything green on their dinner plate, and (2) embarrassment. I don't worry about kids doing a good job when they're in a program at the church. They don't like to practice; they won't learn their lines; they won't pay attention during rehearsals... But I know that when the curtain rises, they're going to be there, because they're not going to embarrass themselves.

Eighty-five years ago FDR addressed our nation and said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear, itself." It's always fear that does a people in. That's why the Bible insists that the opposite of love is not hate, but fear. The writer of 1 John: "*There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear...*" (1 John 4:18)

Gandhi once said, "The enemy is fear. We think it is hate; but, it is fear."

Fear does a people in, not by overestimating the power and influence of the evil that surrounds us, but by underestimating our ability, with God's help, to deal with them. And for all the blustering and posturing in beer commercials, ours is a culture that wears fear like an overcoat—even in July.

A couple of years ago a friend of mine—Deanna—received a Japanese Bonsai tree as a gift. In her own words, despite everything she did for that tree, somehow it still survived. She put it by the window in her office; but frequently forgot to open the blind. Still, it survived. She neglected to water it. Still, it survived. Not that it thrived, mind you. Leaves fell off; it was scrawny; but it was alive.

About a year later she took two weeks' vacation, and moved the tree into her secretary's office. During the vacation, the tree sat in direct sunlight, was watered regularly, and when she returned, the tree was in great shape. She decided to leave it in the secretary's office, where it thrived and grew—for about three months. Then leaves began to turn yellow and fall off. Deanna said it looked like Charlie Brown's Christmas tree.

Deanna and her secretary added nutrients to the water, and trimmed the effected leaves, but the condition continued to worsen until they were afraid they soon would be left with nothing but a stick.

They called a nursery, and after answering some questions, determined that the plant had become "root-bound"—the root system had outgrown the pot, and all the plant's energy was being concentrated on maintaining the roots.

So, Deanna bought a larger pot, and potting soil, and plant food, and made the transfer. Well, the plant seemed to flourish—for about two weeks.

Again the leaves began to turn yellow and fall off—and there weren't a lot of leaves left! So, Deanna took the plant to a nursery, where the staff started examining the dirt and the leaves, looking for fungus or bugs. In the process, they tilted the pot, and the plant fell out of the dirt. She hadn't loosened the roots when she transplanted the tree—she had been afraid of damaging them.

She had taken the plant out of the old pot, but hadn't rearranged the shape of the root ball—the roots still conformed to the shape they had in the old pot; therefore, they were unable to branch out into the new dirt and establish a new foothold.

So Deanna took the tree home, took out of the pot and started to shake it and pull its tightly compacted roots apart. Some of them broke off, and she was sure she had finally killed it; but she had decided she had nothing to lose.

And, by changing the shape of the root ball, and freeing up the roots to go in new directions, the tree flourished, and began to add branches and new leaves.

We long for joy in our lives. We yearn to experience—and to express—the reality of Paul's words in the closing of his letter to the church at Philippi:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and *your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (PHILIPPIANS 4:4-8 NRSV)*

Like the Bonsai tree whose roots had conformed to the shape of the old pot, we cannot thrive—we cannot experience fulness of life—we cannot “rejoice”—in the Lord or in anything else, so long as our lives continue to conform to the things that bring fear—as long as we continue to wear fear like an overcoat in July.

The way to bring Joy into a fearful life is to change the shape of our roots—to free them from what binds us to fear, so that they might grow in new directions; toward things that are true, things that are honorable, and just, and pure, and pleasing, and commendable: things of excellence that are worthy of praise.

This is not some Pollyanna call to ignore or deny the fearful things in life. They're real; and they're not going to go away. Rather, this is a call to not dwell on them and obsess on them while doing nothing about them. It is a call to confront fear and move through it by doing something intentional and proactive about it: something true and honorable and just and pure and pleasing and commendable and excellent and praiseworthy.

Our niece, Amy Piatt, was senior pastor at First Christian Church in Portland, Oregon, an open and affirming congregation. Amy was active in events that supported the LGBTQ community. One hot summer Sunday morning a group of protestors showed up, carrying placards and signs and chanting ugly anti-gay things.

Amy was afraid; but, she gathered the elders in the kitchen. They prayed together, and then took cases of bottled water outside. As they handed out the water to the protestors, they said, “You must be hot. We'd like you to have this cool water, because we love you.” At first the confrontations were threatening; but, slowly, the chanting quieted. Amy said, “I'd like to pray with you,” and she led a

prayer that somehow God's will might be accomplished through what was happening there. Then, she invited the protestors to come inside and worship with them.

Most of the crowd left; but, a few did go inside and worship; and a couple of them became regular attenders—because Amy and those elders threw off the overcoat of fear, and focused, instead, on intentionally and proactively acting in love.

Don't wear fear like an overcoat in July. Throw off the overcoat and instead, be intentional and proactive in focusing your life, your thoughts and your efforts on making things happen that are true, and honorable, and just, and pure, and pleasing, and commendable; things of excellence that are worthy of praise. When we make these things happen, Fear is replaced by Joy!

Pray with me.