

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, June 22, 2008, Year A, Proper 7

St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector

Scripture: Matthew 10:16-33

"No Fear... It Takes The Courage Of A Lion"

5-year old Johnny was in the kitchen as his mother made supper. She asked him to go into the pantry and get her a can of tomato soup, but he didn't want to go in alone. **"It's dark in there and I'm scared."** She asked again, and he persisted. Finally **she said, "It's OK--Jesus will be in there with you."** Johnny hesitated as he walked to the door and slowly opened it. He peeked inside, saw it was dark, and started to leave when all at once an idea came to him, and he said: **"Jesus, if you're in there, would you hand me that can of tomato soup?"**

Fear surrounds us.

"Apparently **fear is a factor** for 5 year old Johnny." When it really comes down to it – I believe that fear is a factor for all of us.

How many of us have seen the TV Show called FEAR FACTOR? This show ran on network TV until 2006 and made people do some outrageous and insane things --- just to beat out others – seeing who could win a lot of money. I won't even begin to describe some of the things they make them do, let alone eat! And now wouldn't you know it - there's another show that has come out this summer that is called FEAR ITSELF. For 13 weeks they are pushing the envelope to scare the dickens out of the audience using blood and gore. Now, doesn't that sound like fun on a hot summer night? I don't think so!

In today's society we are surrounded by people who try things just for the excitement and thrill of it – to test their amount of fear – all for the adrenaline rush: from bungee jumping to driving at excessive speeds "and then some" – purely to test and experience FEAR firsthand.

Oh, and what about the fear of the unknown? Is anyone here familiar with this one? What will tomorrow bring? I know – you might hear it labeled as anxiety, worry, angst – or apprehension. All of those are other names or classes of fear.

Fear can be so bad that when it gets a hold of you it can practically immobilize you – and freeze you in your tracks. The only real answer to fear is courage! **Courage answers the question – are you pretending to be a lion or a mouse? "Courage is a remarkable thing. It doesn't mean that you are not afraid – instead it means that somehow – you get past it – and do the job that you were called to do."**

The famous World War I flying Ace, fighter pilot and racecar driver Eddie Rickenbacker once said: *"Courage is doing what you're afraid to do. There can be no courage unless you're scared."* (I want to repeat that) *"Courage is doing what you're afraid to do. There can be no courage unless you're scared."*

One summer night during a severe thunderstorm a mother was tucking her small son into bed. She was just about to turn the light off when he asked in a trembling voice, **"Mommy, will you stay with me all night?"** Smiling, the mother gave him a warm, reassuring hug and said tenderly, **"I can't dear. I have to sleep in Daddy's room."**

A long silence then followed. At last it was broken by a shaky voice saying, **"Boy! Daddy's a big sissy!"**

Three times in today's Gospel, Jesus tells the disciples – and us - **not to fear – not to be afraid.** Jesus' point from the three repetitions of His command **not to fear** is pretty clear. In Verse 26, He says *"So do not fear them."* In Verse 28, *"Do not fear those who kill the body."*

And in Verse 31: Jesus says "*So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.*" **Jesus' aim here is to help us to overcome fear and to instill courage. Indeed, but courage to do what?**

To speak clearly - in the light- and openly - on the housetops – and you know what - that could be in the lunch or break room, on the bus, or at the mall, maybe even in a restaurant -- when that “speaking” might get you in trouble. We are **to not be afraid to speak clearly and openly** what Jesus Christ has taught you - NO MATTER WHAT THE COST. Jesus is not ashamed of you – and we have absolutely no reason to be ashamed of Him.

Or to express this point more precisely: **“Be courageous to speak the truth of Scripture clearly and openly for all to hear even if it is unpopular and dangerous.”**
It is crunch time --- are you a lion or mouse?

When I think of the word “courage” - I can’t help but think of the “Cowardly Lion” from the Wizard of Oz. Bert Lahr played him to the hilt – “if he only had the nerve – he would be king of the forest.” We are shown that through his courage – along with Tin Man, Scarecrow, and, yes, even little Toto – he saves Dorothy from the Wicked Witch of the West. That lion had the courage all along – God given if you will. **When he realized the truth** – he finally did take his place as a real hero – complete with medal and all – the king of the forest – all because of that truth!

Jesus, who in Scripture is called the Lion of Judah, gives us five reasons why WE should have the courage to speak His truth – with the courage of a lion.

Please look to the back page of your bulletin and follow along as I refer to today’s Holy Gospel from Matthew:

1. **First**, notice the "so" at the beginning of verse 26: "***So have no fear of them.***" (some translations use the word “therefore”) In other words, fearlessness flows from what Jesus just said, namely, "*If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household?*" **Therefore we MUST have no fear of them.** Does that help to make you fearless? Well, it should! If Jesus as the Master of the house is verbally disrespected and torn down – then, we as his followers – and here Jesus is actually calling us family – members of His household – we can expect the same treatment. I believe that what Jesus is saying to us is this: "**Any mistreatment for speaking the truth clearly and openly is not to be some unexpected, accidental, random, or meaningless experience; it's just the way the way they treated me, and so it's a sign that you belong to me -- you are part of my household. So don't be afraid of the names they call you when you speak out plainly, those very names bind you and me together.**"
2. **Second**, notice the word "for" in the middle of verse 26 "***So have no fear of them; FOR*** (here comes the second reason not to be afraid) ***nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.***" ***This is BIG! This is HUGE!*** This assures us that **the truth we are speaking will triumph**. It will be vindicated in the end.
 - **People may reject it now.**
 - **They may call it the word of Beelzebul (or the devil) – like in today’s Gospel.**
 - **They may cast it (and you) out.**
 - **They may try to bury it and hide it from the world and pretend that it does not exist.**

But Jesus gives us great **comfort and certainty** in telling us to take heart in the cause of truth,

- because in the end - **all truth with be revealed,**
- all reality will be uncovered.
- And those who spoke it with clarity and openness will be vindicated.
- Do not fear!

Wow! This is awesome news!

3. **Third**, in Verse 28 Jesus tells us not to fear, after all - you can only be killed! He says: "*Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.*" This might not sound like good news --- but hold on a minute -- In other words, **the worst thing your enemies can do to you when you speak the truth is to kill your body.** And that leaves your soul untouched and happy in God forever and ever. **But if you keep silent**, if you walk away from the truth and fall in love with the praise of men **you could lose your very soul.** And **THAT**, my brothers and sisters - **is what you ought to fear.** But don't fear what man can do to you. All another human can do is send your soul to paradise. **Fear not!**

I remember our good friend Paul Wilbur, who stood right up here leading worship at St. Bart's on the first Sunday of Advent. He reminded us of a time when his life was being endangered and he put it this way to those who wanted to hurt him - "**go ahead - threaten me with heaven!**" Can you imagine? And that makes me think of these words written by author Robert Louis Stevenson: "*Keep your fears to yourself; share your courage with others.*" Absolute wisdom! (It is important to know that throughout Scripture - God keeps reminding us to have courage: He says "fear not" 165 times, He tells us "Do not be afraid" - 114 times, and simply "Do not fear" 138 times. You'd think we would get the message!

4. **Jesus' fourth reason:** don't fear to speak the truth, but be courageous and speak clearly and openly because God is giving close and intimate attention to all you do. Attention more closely than you can imagine. My brothers and sisters in Christ - **we love and serve a God of detail.** Remember that it is God who told Moses all of the details for the Ark of the Covenant and for the Tent of Meeting. Intricate details! Jesus says to us, "**Even the hairs of your head are all counted.**" **The suffering you may undergo** in speaking the truth is **NOT because God is disinterested in you or unfamiliar with your troubles.** He is close enough to you that He can separate one hair from another and give each one a number.

Don't be afraid -- Fear not!

- He is close;
- He is interested;
- He cares.

Be of good courage and speak the truth - **no matter what!**

5. **And finally**, Jesus says that we should "fear not" because God will not let anything happen to you - apart from his gracious will. Jesus logic is plain and precious. Look at Verse 31: "**You are of more value than many sparrows.**" Now look at verse 29: "**Not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.**"

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, June 22, 2008, Year A, Proper 7

I don't know about you -- but this fills me full of courage. **No harm will befall you but what God mercifully wills.** I pray each and every day to be in - and to do God's Will.

Knowing that God cares even to the hairs on my head;

- cares that I will spend eternity with Him;
- cares enough to send His Son to die on the cross for the forgiveness of my sins. If we remember that the ultimate victory has already been won – we can claim the peace of Christ even in the most troublesome of times!
- **This absolutely fills me with courage.**

Being in relationship with Jesus – as part of His family – should fill us with the desire to tell others about Him – to the point of overflowing.

Telling others about Jesus, His life, death and resurrection -- is spreading the Good News – And that Good News is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Believe it or not – when we tell others about Jesus, we are doing evangelism. (I know - the dreaded “E” word) St. Francis of Assisi is often credited with saying to “**Preach the gospel everyday; and if necessary, use words.**”

We can spread the Gospel not only through what we say – but by who we are – and how we treat others.

- Who are you, when no one is looking?

Jesus reminds us that when we acknowledge Him to others – then He acknowledges us to the Father. No matter what others say – we **must love the truth!**

The TRUTH in Jesus Christ tells us: What you learn of Christ in private – you are to speak in the light – in public. What you hear in the Scriptures proclaim from the housetops. And do not fear the face of any one.

That, my brothers and sisters sounds like a lion to me! AMEN? Amen!