

A friend of mine shared a picture titled “scariest pumpkins ever.” It had Jack-o-lanterns carved to say “student loans,” “the wifi is down,” “1% battery,” and “check engine.” Modern life, it seems, is a time of unprecedented fear, and that’s no laughing matter. Ironically, right now is a safer time to be alive than any other in human history. And not just because wild animal attacks are now very rare, even in Florida. The media are so misleading.

Sanitation, vaccination, and all the wonders of modern medicine have dramatically reduced, and in a few cases eradicated, diseases that once ravaged helpless populations. Many of the diseases that do claim many lives today are ones that, in premodern times, people simply didn’t live long enough to develop. While there is food insecurity in our country, and we should be much more ashamed of that than we are, we don’t have people dying of hunger, and even in the third world, circumstances are much improved over even 20 years ago. The spread of democracy and the incentives of global trade have made war less common. Even crime rates and car accidents are near historic lows, in our country, at least. We have our social and political problems, and I’m very concerned about climate change, but I think that most people, given the facts and the choice, would rather live now than in any previous time.

So why do I feel like there is more fear in the air now than ever before? It’s not as if Western culture has failed to teach us to confront and manage our fears. Today’s culture of fear reminds me of what Shakespeare wrote for the title character in “Julius Caesar”: “Cowards die many times before their deaths; The valiant never taste of death but once.” Or as Frank Herbert wrote,

I must not fear.

Fear is the mind-killer.

Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.

I will face my fear.

I will permit it to pass over me and through me.

And when it has gone past, I will turn the inner eye to see its path.

Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain.

How have we forgotten these things, especially when fear is generally regarded as unpleasant? Why do we have so much of something that we don’t want?

Part of the problem is the news media and social media scaring us to get more attention, and thus more money. Part of it is politicians and others in power using fear to make people do what they want — the oldest trick in the book. And part of it is that human beings just aren’t very good at judging danger. We tend to overestimate the risk of dramatic but unlikely things, like attacks, and underestimate the risk of things that aren’t exciting but do kill a lot of people, like unhealthy lifestyles. Ironically, we ignore the biggest threats *because* they harm people all the time! But keeping all these things

in mind can help us overcome a lot of our fears.

Then, there is the decline in faith, some of which is the consequence of fears taught by well-meaning Christians. Many of us were taught, implicitly or explicitly, to fear God. Some of us were told that God loves us, but then went on to hear God portrayed in ways that left us terrified. Some of us have seen and experienced terrible things done by people, but in the name of God. And our own translations bear some of the blame.

Even translations like the one we use, the New Revised Standard Version, which are deliberately progressive in some ways, persist in an archaic use of the word “fear.” When we hear, “fear the Lord your God all the days of your life,” we naturally assume that the word “fear” means what it means every other time we use it. But the translators are using a meaning of the word that has fallen into disuse, a meaning along the lines of “healthy respect for something more powerful than you are.” I’m sure the translators wanted a concise translation, but they do us a great disservice here.

So it’s my job to teach you that we don’t need to be afraid of God. At least I don’t have to fear being out of work. Seriously though, God blesses us with such abundance in this life. God’s love for us includes forgiveness and mercy for all our sins, and much more. In the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ, God makes eternal life in heaven available to all of us. Therefore even death, for the Christian, is nothing to fear, and we have an obligation to share this good news so that everyone can overcome that fear.

We don’t need to fear death, but what about life? I don’t mean the specific fears I ticked off a few minutes ago. A fear I used to struggle with was the fear of wasting my life, of failing to make the most of whatever time I might have. In my adolescence and young adulthood I struggled with the fear that, in a life that offered so many possibilities, how could I know which were the right ones, the choices that would give me lasting satisfaction? What could I do that would let me look back someday and say, “That was all worth it,” and perhaps even, “Thank you, God”?

The answer for everyone is different, but the way of reaching the answer is the same. After a lot of soul searching and conversation, I realized that God was calling me to be a priest. But for the vast majority of people, the answer lies elsewhere. I can think of no better guidance toward reaching the right answer for you than in the summary of the Law that Jesus gives us in today’s Gospel.

The scribe’s question, like the word “fear,” needs a little unpacking. When he asks which commandment is “first,” he doesn’t mean “most important.” If God commands something, then that something is important. Rather, as Dr. Morna Hooker pointed out, he’s asking “which [is] the basic principle from which the rest could be derived. ... Asked for one commandment, Jesus gives two, but they belong together. Here we see the essential unity of faith and ethics in the Old Testament. To love God means to love one’s neighbour, and if one fails to love one’s neighbour, any claim to love God is empty.”*

Jesus's summary of the law points the way to a life not necessarily without fear, but free from fear. Remember that the point of the Law, and of the whole concept of a relationship with God in both the Old and New Testaments, is *not* earning God's favor. God already loves us, and does more for us, than we could ever ask or hope for. Rather, the point is helping us live in the freedom that God's love provides for us, truly live, live well, and certainly avoid the emptiness of life that I had been afraid of.

The way to live truly and well, is to love. Because while exploring our options is wise, if we never choose to commit to anything in the way loving commits us, our lives will never come into focus, but rather flash by, as we wonder what the point of anything is, and who we even are.

We must love something, but not just anything. We can choose to love money, but of course the love of money is the root of all evil. Money, achievements, status, security, they all have their uses, but they can never love us back. Neither can the state, no matter who is running it. But God and our neighbors can love us. And in every place and time, there are so many ways to love them. Not every way makes sense for every person, but for every one of us there is at least one great, life-giving way to love God and our neighbor.

God's love for us is certain and everlasting, but there are no guarantees that God will express that love in the ways we want. Love God anyway. With the right attitude, you might open yourself to receive from God something better than what you wanted. Our neighbors' love for us is far from certain. Love your neighbor anyway. With the right attitude, you might grow in resilience and grace, and develop into the image of himself God imprinted on your soul. We might still sometimes feel afraid, but in a life devoted to holy love we can never be held captive by fear, never be controlled by fear. In this way, love makes us truly free.

Our faith is more than opinions and habits and, God help us, labels. Our faith is a relationship with God that lets us transcend the fears of this life and leave them far behind, in favor of the joy and grace God has always intended for us, both now and in the life to come. For these and all his mercies, God's holy Name be blessed and praised; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Morna D. Hooker, "The Gospel According to Mark" in *New Proclamation Commentary on the Gospels*, p. 95, Fortress Press: 2006.