

Fear not!

Be not afraid!

A Message from the Workgroup on Constructive Theology

Jesus asked his disciples, “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?”

Scripture declares, “The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?”

There are loud voices in our common life delivering a different message today. They warn us that the world is filled with people who are so terribly dangerous that we must be afraid.

Those who desire power often promote fear, because fearful people are easy to manipulate. People who are scared will do almost anything, justified by their own anxiety. The cultivation of fear has enabled some of the worst seasons of human history—those times when ordinary people do terrible things. Theologian Howard Thurman wrote, “Fear insulates the conscience against a sense of wrongdoing.”

When we are goaded to fear, we must remember: fear is the opposite of faith.

Some in our midst who seek power foster fear of immigrants and refugees. But the Bible commands us to care for the stranger and the sojourner. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus promises the Kingdom of Heaven to his faithful, saying “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

Some who seek control encourage fear of people of various ethnicities, such as people identified as black, Hispanic, or Arab. But Christian faith declares that we are all beloved children of God. The diversity within humanity is a gift and a blessing to us, as well as something in which God delights. Galatians 3:28 says that in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female.”

Some who seek advantage incite fear of people who are poor. Yet the Bible is unrelenting in its command to care for the poor. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus begins his ministry by reading the words of the prophet Isaiah, saying, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18).

Some who seek influence incite fear based on sexual orientations and gender identities. The ability to refuse service to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or transgender has been falsely named “religious freedom.” Yet the freedom of the Christian is precisely freedom to love God and neighbor. The commandment to love our neighbor has no preconditions. We are not told to love only those we agree with or approve of.

Fear keeps us from being good neighbors; and it keeps us from recognizing good neighbors and valuing their contributions. As Christians, we are called to love and be loved by our neighbors of other religious traditions—including our Muslim and Jewish neighbors.

Scripture declares: “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, love, and self-discipline.” As we navigate this season, let us heed the advice of Nelson Mandela: “May your choices reflect your hopes and not your fears.”

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