

How Does Love Work Amidst Fear?

Friends, long-time and new, let's begin this time of reflection with prayer. God of all, knit us together as community. Be within each of our precious souls as we consider how your Love works amidst fear in our lives. We ask it in your Spirit. Amen.

Beloved people, I invite you to wonder with me this morning: how does love work amidst fear? In today's paraphrase of Psalm 4, the writer uses several emotion words: distress, anger, and joy are each named once; fear is named twice. The writer uses the word Love with a capital "L" four times to refer to God and love with a lowercase "l" twice to refer to a human experiences and actions.

According to the American Psychological Association, love is "*a complex emotion involving strong feelings of affection and tenderness.*" And fear is "*a basic, intense emotion aroused by the detection of imminent threat, involving an immediate alarm reaction.*" Other sources describe the threats causing fear as typically threats of harm or pain. Other sources describe love as a set of interconnected emotions and behaviors.

The reading from Psalms taps into much of our human experience as the writer names states of mind such as *silence, stillness, peace*; other experiential words such as *gracious, false, life-giving, filled*; and behaviors such as *envelop, hear, listen, seek, cry, rest, give in, commune, be, bask, trust, prosper, teach*.

There is a lot of activity in one brief Psalm – a lot of human experience. Let's sit with each piece of the reading, holding an intention to wonder about how Love works in the midst of fear.

We heard this: *“Answer me when I call, O Beloved of my heart! You enveloped me in Love when I was in dire distress. Be gracious to me now; hear my prayer!”*

Can you relate with the Psalmist’s longing? *“Answer me when I call... Be gracious to me... Hear my prayer...”* I imagine we are all acquainted with longing for the presence of God’s love in the midst of our struggles – our experiences of pain, loss and grief. **I wonder: what conditions are conducive for you to open to toward the Love of God in this way of raw, brave vulnerability?** I encourage us to seek to the company of people, animals, and places where we feel free to express our longings with honesty and vulnerability.

We heard, *“How long will you listen to false words? I seek only what is life-giving.”*

I admit to confusion on whose voice articulates these thoughts. Is it the voice of God’s Love working within us, urging us to tune away from false, destructive messaging so that we give more of our living to the way of Love? Or is it the Psalmist’s voice, our voice, the voice of an individual’s intellect; questioning our own priorities in regard to the messages we take into ourselves (false messages or life-giving messages)? Again, the words from the Psalm were: *“How long will you listen to false words? I seek only what is life-giving.”* **I wonder: to whose voices do you give the ear of your heart and mind (in terms of quantity – sheer airtime)? Are they telling you falsehoods or life-giving truths?** I believe that the messages we take in with our heart intellectual and emotional receptors will slowly but surely affect the responsiveness of our soul – our deepest center, our gut intuition.

We hear some of the same voices in the public sphere. Many of us have people in our lives whose roles are similar to people in the life of the person sitting next to us today. **Would anyone care to share aloud the name or role of someone whose voice commands the attention of your heart and mind? I am looking for a single word (just the name or role such as mother, brother, coworker).** This person may be living or dead. Their messages may be of falsehood or they may be life-giving messages to which you give the ear of your heart and your intellect. Let's hear some names or roles. What are the voices we hear? *[pause as names are shared]* Who has our ear?

We heard, *"You know that the Beloved dwells with all who are filled with love; Love hears when our hearts cry out. Though you may feel angry, do not give in to fear; commune with the Heart of your heart as you rest; be in silence. Bask in the stillness. Face your fears with forgiveness, and trust in love."*

I love the generosity with which the Psalmist acknowledges that we naturally experience anger and fear as we move through our days. And I appreciate the gentle invitation to silence and stillness. **I wonder: are their ways in which you create spaces of silence and stillness in your days? And I wonder: did you catch the Psalmists' inference that silence and stillness make space for us to face our fears with forgiveness and to develop trust in Love?** Repentance and forgiveness form one of the beautifully strong threads of our Judeo Christian heritage. In the silence of our heart searching, we recognize where we have sinned (failed to love ourself or another). Grace leads us to leap or collapse into the arms of Love (possibly embodied by that photo on the cover of our bulletin), hoping our trust will be met with an experience of knowing we are forgiven.

We heard, *“There are many who say, ‘Grant us special favors, O Mighty One! Bestow upon us your grace that we may prosper!’ Love has brought more joy to my heart than they have when their banks are filled.”*

Here we are reminded by the Psalmist (in a way that might resonate with your soul – your gut intuition – as it does with mine) that Divine Love (the Mighty One) knows what will bring joy to our hearts.

I wonder: how might you attune yourself more fully to Love’s work within your soul – your deepest center, your gut intuition – such that you will be more likely to more frequently hear life-giving truths?

We heard, finally, *“In peace will I spend my days and sleep at night; For You alone, my Beloved, teach me the way of Love!”*

Life is so hard. Learning from Love is difficult, rigorous work. Living can be painful in unexpected ways. Grief is never ending. We adapt. And yet life is really demanding on our emotions, intellects, and soul intuition.

Knowing we are eternal – that we come from the cosmic Love that is God and that we are always and forever returning to Love – does not make life less rigorous. **Yet, I wonder: how might you find a new or renewed way to tap into the kind of deep peace that assures you that you are beloved, enough, and needed as a bearer and sharer of love in this world?**

The more deeply we take to heart the words of the Psalmist and put our trust in Love, the more fluidly we might perceive the power of Jesus’ lived example (his embodiment of the way of Love) at work in our lives. And others might recognize the way of Love through our day-to-day living.

Let's turn to the epistle reading for a brief moment, soaking in encouragement from a fellow follower of Jesus – one who lived much closer to the Jesus' lifetime. Like us, this disciple who wrote the epistle of First John was longing to embody the Love of God in the way of Jesus.

We heard, *"The reason the world does not recognize us is that it never recognized God. My dear friends, now we are God's children, but it has not been revealed what we are to become in the future."*

I wonder: how will we (in our individual lives and as a congregation) make a radically, inclusively loving God recognizable in the communities in which we live?

We also heard, *"All who keep this hope keep themselves pure, just as Christ is pure... Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray; to live a holy life is to be holy, just as Christ is holy."*

Some of us have been wounded by Christian churches and elsewhere by toxic, shame-based messages about purity and holiness. We are reminded throughout these readings of the refreshing power of God's Love to purify, to cleanse us. This is nothing about which to be ashamed. We all need to be washed over and over by the waters of our baptism – by the Love of God inherent in that water – because there is freedom in cleansing. There is release toward being able to more powerfully embody the Love of God with our living.

Today's readings have reminded me of a beloved passage that occurs one chapter later in the epistle of First John, where we would hear: *"There is no fear in love. For perfect love drives out fear. To fear is to expect punishment, and anyone who is afraid is still imperfect in love."*

You may have a complicated relationship with perfection or perfectionism. This is an invitation to know that the opposite of Love is fear. We do experience it. But Love is always at work, moving us more and more toward perfection of the Love that we come from and to which we will return.

I would like to close by sharing with you a blessing from Irish teacher and poet, John O'Donohue in his book *To Bless the Space Between Us*. It is entitled "For Courage." He writes of love at work amidst fear. I invite you to close your eyes (if you are comfortable doing so) and hold your hands and your whole self open to this encouraging blessing.

*"When the light around you lessens
And your thoughts darken until
Your body feels fear turn
Cold as a stone inside,*

*When you find yourself bereft
Of any belief in yourself
And all you unknowingly
Leaned on has fallen,*

*When one voice commands
Your whole heart,
And it is raven dark,*

*Steady yourself and see
That it is your own thinking
That darkens your world.*

*Search and you will find
A diamond-thought of light,*

*Know that you are not alone,
And that this darkness has purpose;
Gradually it will school your eyes,
To find the one gift your life requires
Hidden within this night-corner.*

*Invoke the learning
Of every suffering
You have suffered.*

*Close your eyes.
Gather all the kindling
About your heart
To create one spark
That is all you need
To nourish the flame
That will cleanse the dark
Of its weight of festered fear.*

*A new confidence will come alive
To urge you towards higher ground
Where your imagination
will learn to engage difficulty
As its most rewarding threshold!"*

Friends, may we hold our emotions, our intellects, our soul intuition (our whole beings) open to Love working through us – even and especially amidst fear. That resurrection Love is counting on us. Amen.

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1 John 3:1-7, Psalm 4