

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Jan 7th 2015

When the disciples, rowing against the wind on the Sea of Galilee, see Jesus walking on the water, they are terrified. He says, “Courage! It is I. Do not be afraid.”

If you are terrified, how do you respond to the command, “Don’t be afraid”? Can you turn off terror just by willing it? Of course not. It is the assurance that a trusted person is with that can begin to mitigate the fear.

How do we generally deal with our fears? What does the world say?

Afraid of germs? Super sanitize yours hands, and don’t shake other people’s.

Afraid of physical decline? Organize your life entirely around diet and exercise.

Are you afraid of strangers, especially poor strangers? Move into a gated community.

Afraid of Iran? Prepare to nuke’em before they get dangerous.

That’s the voice of the world. The first letter of John says otherwise. Is your life fear driven? Put your love life in order and you’ll get over it. But remember, the love-talk of Scripture is not the soft, romantic kind. The Bible has room for a celebration of erotic love alright (see the Song of Songs), but mainly it uses the word for attending to the good of other people, pouring yourself out in the service of others’ needs, especially in the community of faith, but also reaching beyond, like the Samaritan aiding the naked man lying unconscious by the roadside.

Chapter four of the First Letter of John is one of those special passages that seem to summarize the message of the New Testament in a single page. Today’s reading is especially helpful in putting in order our understanding of love. To start with the last verse of yesterday’s reading, John insists that our love life begins with God: In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins. Then he moves immediately to a surprising consequence: Beloved, if God so loved us, we also must love one another. No one has ever seen God. Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us. Isn’t that interesting? The way we return God’s love is to pass it on to others. Of course we can love God directly by prayers of gratitude; that’s why we call our practice of the Lord’s Supper Eucharist, which is Greek for thanksgiving. But John insists that passing God’s love on to others is the most important part of our love life with God. Taking that seriously will radically transform most of our lives.

And what, you ask, does all of this have to do with fear? Listen to how today's first reading ends: In this is love brought to perfection among us, that we have confidence on the day of judgment because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment, and so one who fears is not yet perfect in love. Love like God? That's a tall order. But the eternal Son took on human flesh to show us how.

Dennis Hamm, S.J.- Creighton University Jesuit Community