

The Problem With Fear

We normally do not consider fear to be sin, but it's listed first among sins mentioned in the book of Revelation: "The fearful, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, the sorcerers, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death." Revelation 21:8

Why does fear warrant such severe punishment? Because it pushes us toward self interest and violates the first commandment to give our allegiance to God alone.

James Coffman notes in his commentary on this passage: "It is not of natural fear and timidity that the book of Revelation speaks; it is that cowardice, which in the last resort, chooses self and safety before Christ."

Ernest Gann writes in "Fate Is the Hunter": "Fear is a contagious disease, spreading from its first victim to others in the vicinity until it is powerful enough to take charge of a group, in which event it becomes panic."

This fear is seen in Numbers 13:31-33 when those who were sent by Moses to scout out the Promised Land returned full of fear, which caused them to proclaim: "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we." They spread fear among the Israelites saying: "The land has men of great stature. There we saw giants and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight."

Notice how fear made them feel so small—like grasshoppers. Their fearful report caused the Israelites to cry and weep, saying: "If only we had died in the wilderness!"

Today America is divided and in the grip of fear. In the midst of the Civil War, President Lincoln in his first presidential inaugural address stated: "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will swell when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

"We are not enemies but friends." Lincoln's tender words sought to unite a nation torn apart by fear and hate, but his plea went unheeded and America plunged into the Civil War resulting in 620,000 deaths.

Our government carefully screens people immigrating into the United States, as it should. But, the problem is that fear takes us beyond this to a prejudice toward an entire religion, which is why it is so troubling. As Ernest Gann said, "Fear is a contagious disease, spreading from its first victim to others in the vicinity until it is powerful enough to take charge of a group, in which the event becomes panic."

Throughout history, whenever an entire race of people or religion was feared and persecuted, atrocities such as concentration camps and genocide were not far behind.

Today Muslims in America suffer simply because they are Muslims. Why? Because of fear. Like the Israelites, fear has turned us in on ourselves and we feel small and weak like grasshoppers. But Moses refused to become captive to their fear, which enable the Israelites go among foreigners and be faithful to their destiny. Moses' courage was an inspiration to them as it is to us today.

Webster's dictionary defines xenophobia as "fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners." According to both Jewish and Christian scriptures, God identifies with the stranger, i.e., "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." Matthew 25:35 The problem with fear is that it puts our perceived self-interests above religious and moral traditions characteristic of a civilized society.

In the history of Christianity, when trying to discern a path to follow, people looked to the fruits of the Holy Spirit: "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (Galatians 5:22-23). Fear creates anger, hate, xenophobia, racism and the like.

We are living in what will be a very historical time. It's an opportunity for us to listen to what Lincoln called, "the better angels of our nature." He said, "We are not enemies but friends." May Lincoln's tender words echo across the years and become lodged in our hearts today.

During turbulent times in the lives of our parents and grandparents, President Franklin Roosevelt said: "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." His words guided them through a difficult era and now provide important guidance for us today.