



Date: November 6, 2016

Title: "War on Terror, Part Two: Turning Enemies into Allies"

Scripture: Psalm 133; 1 Corinthians 12: 14-27

Description: To address the epidemic of fear in our nation, we need to learn to treat each other with respect, especially affirming our differences as opportunities rather than problems.

Have you graduated from middle school in the past thirty years? Then I'm guessing you have read *Watership Down*, a novel written in the 1970's which became a standard part of English Lit in middle schools for decades. For many, *Watership Down* was your first full-length, grown-up novel. When it was assigned, we protested that it would be impossible to read a book with that many pages. Then, within two chapters of beginning it, we couldn't put it down. A story about rabbits, of all things!

It's a novel about rabbits who search for a warren to call home. The middle school student soon realizes that each of the communities the rabbits encounter has its own political system. The warren at the beginning of the novel is like a traditional society. The rabbits leave there because they correctly anticipate that it's about to be destroyed by humans. A second warren the rabbits meet is run very efficiently. There is one general who exercises total control and keeps all the other rabbits in a state of fear under a military regime. A third community of rabbits are living in ease and comfort. But they can't bring themselves to admit that they're under the spell of a farmer who feeds them but also snares and kills them one by one. The fourth warren is the one the rabbits establish for themselves on a hill called Watership Down.

The rabbits of course have many adventures and survive many perils. This is, after all, a novel, not a textbook. But perhaps the most important thing they learn is that they need each other. One of the rabbits is big and strong; another is quick thinking and imaginative; a third is speedy; a fourth is the smallest and clumsiest, but has a sixth sense that anticipates danger, like the destruction of the original warren. The main thing is that they find ways of using the gifts of every member of the party so that they are never short of wisdom or intelligence about what to do next, or courage and strength to do it. They live as though they were one warren rather than individual bunnies.

Perhaps all Americans should be required to go back to Middle School for a course in English literature.

That's the cool thing about team sports. The winning team is not necessarily the one which has the best players, but the one having the right mixture of size, speed, strength, and leadership, and then realizes it isn't about any one of them being the star but about each of them needing each other. Same with a choir. The soprano doesn't say to the alto halfway through the anthem, "I have no need of you."

Needing each other, and acknowledging that we need each other, is nothing new. It's just that, as Americans we need to be reminded occasionally. Lately, it appears we have forgotten.

The decision we make this week that will have the greatest impact on our nation's future is not who we elect to office on Tuesday but how we treat one another on Wednesday. The worst case scenario is if those who backed the winner say to those who lost, "I have no need of you. Your side lost, therefore we don't need to listen to you, don't need to consider your opinions or listen to your complaints, don't need your input. Come back and try again in four years."

We need each other. We do not need each other to settle our differences and fall in step so we can march into the future like an army in perfect step. We need our differences themselves. Even before creation was finished, Adam needed Eve. God didn't make an identical-twin Adam clone, but made someone who was both "bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh", yet very different. This was a companion far more challenging and far more fulfilling than anyone Adam could have imagined.

Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment. . He said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind," and then immediately before anyone could go off alone and get all private with "I Come to the Garden Alone" playing on their IPod, he riveted it to another: "A second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matt 22: 34-40)

After Tuesday – when the political ads disappear and the lawn signs are taken up, and the debates have grown silent – after Tuesday we turn our attention to the greatest challenge America faces: the challenge of becoming one nation, indivisible, a people living in community. The *United States of America*.

It can be so beautiful, so much in contrast to what we have experienced. "How beautiful it is when kindred dwell together in unity!" begins the Psalm (133) we read this morning. How beautiful is it? "It's like precious oil on the head, running down on the beard of Aaron." (Psalm 133: 2) Oil softens the skin and smooths rough patches; it removes hard edges, the sharp, cutting edges that make encounters abrasive.

Not oil on just anybody's beard and robe – on Aaron's beard and robe. Aaron was a priest. He connected people with God. When people "dwell together in unity" they're able to see God in each other, to experience God's presence through each other.

Except for that person who just drives you crazy, right? The one who is so constantly annoying. You're not going to see God reaching out to you through *that* person.

But what if you did? What if you opened your eyes and had this explosive moment of insight that turned out to be a holy moment? Suddenly that annoying person turns into—no, not your favorite person to hang out with, but someone you can respect. You discover they have a good sense of humor, in a strange and twisted way, but really funny sometimes. Bigger than that, this person turns out to have a heart, a soul even. And sometimes this person speaks something that is true.

“How beautiful it is when kindred...” If you can discern God in that person, you might discover God anywhere, everywhere!

It's a beautiful thing. But it isn't easy. It's going to take some work. We'll have to make an effort.

For one thing, none of us can ever assume we've “made it” and have arrived at the place everybody else should be once they get some sense. Of all people, we Christians should know that we're imperfect. That's why we include a Prayer of Confession regularly in our worship, not to wallow in guilt but to remind ourselves of what everyone else already knows about us: we have flaws and faults. Everyone has some growing up to do.

Our views and opinions aren't perfect. And theirs are not required to be. So cut others some slack. They (and their perspectives) aren't required to demonstrate flawless perfection in order to be helpful. In fact, we can grow best by listening for the good in every opinion.

In a problem-solving seminar, our communication coach requires us to respond with every suggestion by identifying three good aspects about the suggestion. “This is a reasonably intelligent person who is participating with some degree of investment. If you can't think of three good aspects of their idea, it doesn't mean it's a bad idea. It simply means you haven't even listened to it yet.” He'd have us say, “Sam, what I like about that is a), b), c); I wish it also...” (We were not allowed to identify the three good aspects and then say, “...but, followed with our critique. What follows the word, “but”, negates everything that had gone before. “I like a), b), and c), *and I wish it also...*” Sounds like a picky nuance, but it made a huge difference.

Our ideas are not perfect; their ideas do not need to be perfect in order to be good ideas. Let's listen for the value in other people's ideas.

Think of your differences as strengths, not weaknesses. They're opportunities, not obstacles to be overcome. If you were to ask Americans to identify our greatest problem, many of them would say, “other Americans!” But other Americans are our nation's greatest asset.

Take one example. The Bible is made up of sixty-six books. Each is different—some are very different from one another—and one of two even seem to contradict one

another. The Gospel According to Matthew is similar to the Gospel According to Luke, with fresh perspectives on the same story. On the other hand, when Jesus teaches, “Love your enemies...” that is in direct contrast to the passage in Chronicles that reports God commanding the Israelites to slay their conquered enemies and not let one of them survive. This is more than a slightly different perspective!

Yet almost all Christians regard the Bible as God’s gift to the church to reveal God’s character and God’s ways of touching our lives. If we accept that those sixty-six books work together to reveal God, why can’t we accept that the variations of views and perspectives are God’s tools to shape our future?

We need each other, not just to be good Americans, we need each other in order to know God. No way we can say to one another, “I have no need of you.” (This is a major reason why our volunteers love our Laundry Love events—not only to offer the financial gift of free laundry for low-income people but to put us in contact with some of our neighbors our daily routines don’t allow us to even meet, much less listen to and know. “Those kinds of people” have so much to teach us.

Our task is to be one nation, indivisible. Our role as Christians is to be a beacon of light, sharing our experience of living together as a community of faith. “We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord.”

Beginning next Wednesday, let’s show them how it’s done. That may be the most important thing God wants from us right now—by example, we set the tone for our nation.

It isn’t going to be easy. Look around you; some of these very people are not easy! Let’s get started in the next few minutes here at this table. Let’s gather here all mingled together, not separated into red and blue, liberal or conservative, passing bread and cup to whomever may be standing beside you, and grasping hands in one circle as we pray.

Can we do that? Can we do that not just for the next few minutes but begin to do it as a way of life? If it is going to happen in our nation, it has to start somewhere. Here is a good place. Now is a good time.

This sermon was inspired by *Be Not Afraid: Facing Fear with Faith* by Samuel Wells, particularly Chapter 12, “But It Shall Not Be So Among You.” The book was published by Brazos Press in 2011.

It feels to me that Americans are enduring an epidemic of fear. I realize this is the day before Halloween, but I don't believe spooks and goblins are the source of what is causing our fear. Maybe fear just goes with the pre-election season. Politics is dominated by fear, with each party and each candidate describing what terrible things await us if the opposing candidate is elected. The phrase "War on Terror" implies fear is something you can somehow kill. I'm not so sure. In fact, I believe that, like certain germs within our body that actually contribute to our health, a certain level of fear is a good thing. In some ways, fear discloses our love.

But the kind of fear we're living with these days certainly doesn't feel like a good thing. It feels like chronic fatigue or an ever-present low-grade headache. Let's look at fear in its exponentially most intense form: terror. I know you've been afraid; have you ever been terrified? The couple of times I recall both involved my children being in danger. I'm not going to share the details, because I don't want to relive them. And if you've ever been terrified, you already know how physical it is: that twisting screwdriver at the base of your stomach, that trembling shiver under your lower spine, that drying of the throat and tightening of the chest, the instinctive slow shaking of the head and the glazed staring of the eyes that says, "Oh...my...God."

Peter, James, and John went there in a heartbeat that afternoon. They followed the Jesus they thought they knew up a mountain trail. There, suddenly, they wondered if they had really known him at all. His face changed, and his clothes became a dazzling white, so that it was hard to look at him. Then they saw the Old Testament creak open and Moses and Elijah walked out, not as preserved historical wax figures but as prime-time prophets as they parked themselves on either side of Jesus. Then a big cloud came over like a flyover at the Super Bowl and the sky started speaking—that's right, the very sky started speaking—about being Jesus's Father. The disciples did the only thing that made sense—they dove under the covers, because they were scared out of their minds.

Which isn't always a bad thing. Fear itself isn't an enemy. It's an emotion that identifies what we love. The quickest way to discover what or whom someone loves is to find out what they are afraid of. We fear because we don't want to lose what we

love. We fear intensely when we love intensely or when we think what or whom we love is in real danger. So a world without fear wouldn't be a good thing, because it wouldn't be just a world without danger—it would be a world without love.

You think back on times when you've been really afraid, and they were awful times, but in some ways those moments of fear are periods when you feel most fully alive. Why do combat soldiers hold reunions decades later? Not to refresh their memories of how horrible it was, but to tell stories of brotherhood and heroism and recall how alive they felt. When you feel death or danger is near, the people with you suddenly matter a lot to you, and the people you already care about suddenly become very important and you want to squeeze hands or hold people close and tell them what you need to tell them. After years of forgetting or ignoring or even neglecting them, you want to put into words what you realize has been true all along. Maybe afterwards you and they wish that a lot more of life could be like that.

On the mountain, the disciples saw things that terrified them. That voice that said, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him."—they thought they knew Jesus. They knew he was something special. He'd been named MVP (Most Valuable Preacher) two years running and was surely headed for a Nobel Peace Prize. If it were now, he'd have tee-shirts and You Tube videos and he'd have appeared on all the late night talk shows. But this wasn't that celebrity, rising-star Jesus. Clearly the whole presence and power of God was in Jesus that day. Whenever you have a close encounter with the true God, it's more than unnerving; it's often terrifying. Jesus was the point where the closest humanity had ever come to God met the closest God had ever come to humanity.

The disciples weren't fools. Their legs turned to jelly. All the tightening of the stomach and heightened awareness and the slow-motion time kicked in. They were looking at the nature and destiny of humankind and God straight in the face. Their knees buckled and they were face down in the dirt, begging to be spared.

Look at what happens next in the story. This is what Jesus does about fear. Let's watch closely; maybe people remembered this story because it wasn't just a one-time event. Look what Jesus does about fear. Four things.

"But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up, and do not be afraid?' (Matthew 17:7)

First, Jesus comes to the disciples. No shouting from afar, no issuing edicts from above, no criticizing or judging, no embarrassing, no squeezing the emotions from the moment to manipulate. Jesus comes to the disciples. Did you know that in the Bible, the words "came down" occur 114 times. In the Old Testament, the "birds of prey came

down" (Genesis 15:11). The daughter of Pharaoh came down to...the river." (Exodus 2:5). Fire came down so often the government declared a no burn policy. But in the gospels, Jesus is the one who came down. As one of our recent Christmas carols celebrates, "He came down that we might have love." Jesus comes to the disciples. He makes the journey across their fear.

Then, second, it says that Jesus touched them. Did you notice that? He *touched* them.

I've told some of you about traveling alone across the country by Greyhound bus from Knoxville, TN to L.A. I was twelve, sent there to help my older brother move back home. A twelve-year-old, across country, alone. That was a different America. But twelve-year-old boys haven't changed much, so somewhere outside of Dallas I lost my ticket. In Dallas I was scheduled to change busses, but I couldn't do that with no ticket. I had the remains of a sack lunch and a few dollars for meals.

As the sun set, I became a serious Bible-reader and a prayer warrior. Late in the evening, the driver motioned me to come up front. I told him what had happened, and even in the dark I couldn't hide my fear. "Step down there," he ordered, motioning to the stair well at the bus door. I glanced at the sign ordering, "No passengers in front of the white line," but he shrugged, "It's dark. No one will see."

He told me about being in the army in Korea, about getting separated from his company and about hiding behind enemy lines for three days. We talked until almost midnight when he pulled the bus into the station. He thanked me for helping him stay awake. After the other passengers had disembarked, he walked me to the ticket master and had a duplicate printed for me.

I never learned his name. But in the years since, I've grown to realize who he was. That was Jesus, disguised as a Greyhound bus driver. That Jesus didn't come to me in my fear, which would have been awkward at 65 mph, but he invited me to come near him, with the same effect. That day on the mountain, Jesus made the journey across their fear and he held them in the midst of their terror, by touching them.

Only then, third, does Jesus speak. First thing he says is "Get up." That's interesting. The disciples are clearly still petrified. But Jesus has come to them and they've felt his touch. Now it's time for them to get up. Jesus encourages them to get up while they're still frightened. Does that say something to you? *Jesus invites them to get up while they're still frightened.* He knows they're scared. But, scared or not, it's time to get up. The disciples begin to realize that what they dearly loved is not genuinely threatened. Jesus is beyond anything they had imagined and is closer to them than they

had known. That's a lot to absorb, but the best place to do it isn't face down on the ground.

Then, fourth, Jesus says, "Don't be afraid." Which by now, after the first three things, doesn't really need to be said. Jesus has come to them, touched them, and raised them to their feet. They look up and see what was there at the beginning of time and what will be there at the end of time: nothing but Jesus, nothing but God's life shaped so that it is present to us. What they were afraid of turned out to be Jesus, as everything, everything in all creation, will ultimately turn out to be enveloped in Jesus. And Jesus was there to touch them, raise them, and send them on their way.

Now, that is a story that happened one time only, on a mountain halfway across the world, thousands of years ago. Or it is a microcosm of the whole Jesus story. The whole gospel is encapsulated in that one single verse, "But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.'"

The whole story is right there, and it begins with the disciples frozen in terror. So if you're afraid these days for our nation, for your future, for anyone who is important to you, then hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus comes to you. Jesus touches and holds you. Jesus gently puts you back on your feet. And Jesus says to you, "Don't be afraid."

Amen.

\*The material for this sermon, with a few minor adaptations, was taken from *Be Not Afraid: Facing Fear with Faith* by Samuel Wells, published by Brazos Press in 2011.