

Sermon for 2017 Yr A Proper 7  
Preached Sunday June 25, 2017 at St. James', Mount Vernon  
By Seldon Walker

# 1)GOD, 2)FAMILY, 3)FOOTBALL

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As some of you may know, I spent last summer as a hospital chaplain as part of a program called Clinical Pastoral Education. While rewarding, it was one of the most frightening and fear-filled experiences of my life. Looking back on the many patient visits that I had and the many cases I dealt with, it seems somewhat silly to think that I was afraid at all, but I was. Without fail, each time I went to knock on a patient's door, or each time I was awoken at some terrible hour during the nighttime shift, fear filled my soul. I wasn't afraid of what I may find behind the door or what terrible things I may see; I wasn't even afraid of the fact that someone may die while I was with them in the room – I knew things like that would happen, they were part of the job. The thing that I feared the most was not doing my job as a chaplain correctly. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to comfort the patients in the right way; afraid that I would say the wrong thing; afraid that I wouldn't make a difference my patients' lives at perhaps their most desperate and needy moments; afraid that somehow my actions and my words may take them away from God instead of bringing them closer to God at a time that they needed God the most. That feeling was there with every visit. Fear was there. Fear consumed me.

## 2. SEQUENCE 2 – FEAR

Fear is something that we all deal with and it follows us throughout all phases of life. Whether it's a fear of the aging process and the things that come with it; fear for our children's well being as they grow; or fear that Santa won't bring us presents on Christmas morning...no matter what the fear, those fears are real and we all carry them. In today's Gospel text fear is brought into the picture and we learn that even the most faithful followers of Jesus, his disciples, also had fears. While the text doesn't specifically tell us what they were afraid of, I can only imagine the things that they were going through. Can you imagine what it must have felt like to leave your family, your children, your home, your whole life behind? Fearing for their families was something the disciples probably always carried with them, but not only that, they probably feared for their lives at times as well because of the man who they were following. Jesus was not the most popular person in his time; after all, he was preaching against everything that everyone had come to learn, was turning the world upside down, and was telling everyone that they were doing things the wrong way. Can you imagine how the disciples must have felt as they were going out into the crowds of people, trying to teach the ways of Jesus? Must have been pretty frightening.

### 3. SEQUENCE 3 – FEAR IN MATTHEW

Not only does fear show up in this Gospel text, but it is a common theme throughout Matthew, and it is something that Matthew, like Jesus, wants his community, his followers, to overcome. Moreover, when themes such as fear repeat themselves in any text, it is worth paying attention to. If you think back to Advent IV, in the very beginning of the Gospel when the angel of the Lord appears to Joseph to announce the birth of Christ, the angel's first words are "do not be afraid." Fast-forwarding to the end of the Gospel when the resurrected Jesus appears to Mary, Martha, and the disciples, we also see the words "do not be afraid." "Do not be afraid." Of course in each of these circumstances the surface level meaning of these words "do not be afraid" is to communicate safety. In other words, the angle of the Lord and the resurrected Jesus wanted Joseph, Mary and Martha, and the disciples to know that they were coming in peace; that no harm was going to come from them or their messages. But if we look deeper into the meaning of these words, look for the deeper message behind them, we can see that safety is not really the focus and that is where today's Gospel text plays an important role.

### 4. SEQUENCE 4 – GOD IS WITH US

In our Gospel text for today, Jesus was able to recognize that his disciples still had not come to realize something of utmost importance; something that would have helped their ministry tenfold. Something that I too failed to realize during my moments of fear in the hospital. That something is that God is always with us. God is always there, and always will be. Jesus knew that the disciples were growing into their new faith, but they were having trouble pushing aside their fears in order to proclaim the new message of Christ. Likewise, as I was growing into my role as a new chaplain, I was having trouble pushing aside my fears in order to proclaim the message of God to my patients. What the disciples failed to realize, what I failed to realize, was that God was already there, out there in the streets, out there in the world; God was already there in the hospital room. All the disciples had to do was to get up and go out; all I had to do was to walk into the room. God was already there doing what God does best; I just had to meet him there and let him take over; let him cast aside my fear so that he could work through me.

### 5. SEQUENCE 5 – EASIER SAID THAN DONE

Unfortunately, maintaining such a mindset is easier said than done. Even as I became more comfortable with each visit, simply walking in the room realizing that God was already there, was not always easy for me. I was distracted; I let my mind wander away from God; let my mind worry about my own selfish thoughts and needs and at times I probably let my ego get the best of me. Yet, I think this is why the second portion of our Gospel text is so important. While Jesus' words may seem harsh: "for I have come to set a man against his father...a daughter against her mother..." and so on and so forth, his words have strength. Jesus wasn't suggesting to his disciples that that they shouldn't love their families, or that their families would become their enemies as a result of following him. Instead, Jesus was trying to have his disciples recognize that distraction and fear will always be overwhelming forces if they did not to put God into their lives first and foremost. God must come before anything else, even family.

## 6. SEQUENCE 6 – GOD, FAMILY, FOOTBALL

Former Florida State football coach, perhaps one of the most successful college football coaches of all time, I think was so successful because he realized just this. He realized that God needed to come first in his life, before his family, and yes even before football. He refused to let football become his god, and he refused to let his players do that as well. In a book he wrote shortly after he retired, one of my favorite chapters was the one where he wrote about what he told his players at the beginning of each academic year: “first comes God, then comes family, then comes your studies, and somewhere after all of those things happen, football finds its way in.” Coach Bowden was able to recognize exactly what Jesus was saying to his disciples in our Gospel text for this morning. God must come first in our lives.

## 7. SEQUENCE 7 – THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

God must come first. He must come before family, before friends, before work, before sports, before fun and play. This my friends is the cost of discipleship. As disciples of Christ, we are not just called to think about the things Christ did as if they were some ideal thing to be admired. No. We are called to live out the things Christ did. As disciples, our lives are supposed to be in parallel with Jesus’, not divergent. That means that we must share not only in his love and grace and mercy, but as we take up his cross we must also share in his fate of rejection and persecution. But that is okay because remember that God is always with you. God will never leave you, but those distractions and fears in your mind will leave, if you put God first. And guess what, the world needs you to be an example of what it looks like to put God first, because I think the world has forgotten what this looks like, let alone that God exists in the first place.

## 8. SEQUENCE 8 – DO NOT BE AFRAID

Just this week, I happened to catch a glimpse of the show called American Grit. For those of you who don’t know what it is, it is a show hosted by professional wrestler John Cena who puts a group of people through various challenges so that they can overcome their fears and anxieties and “get their grit back.” At the beginning of the episode, one of the contestants was asked to pray for her meal. For a very brief moment I thought to myself ‘this is great...they are actually talking about prayer on a network television show...there is hope for the world after all.’ And then Sena ruined it. He went on to say “you can pray however you’d like, you can even pray to the crab (she was eating crab soup), you just have to pray.” So what did the contestant do, she prayed to the crab. “Dear crab...” she said. I quickly became angry thought to myself ‘Dear crab? What the heck is this nonsense? It is no wonder our world is in such a troubled state...we are now praying to crabs.’ And then my heart sank into my chest and I was consumed with sadness because I realized at that moment that the contestant probably didn’t even know that God existed...didn’t even know that it was God who was responsible for her meal, responsible for her life. The people on that show didn’t need “grit back” they needed God back. The world needs God back and it is people like you, disciples of Christ, who can give God back to them. Therefore my friends, do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to go out into the world and proclaim the good news of Christ. Do not be afraid to put God first in your lives. Do not be afraid to go against the grain to tell people about the love of God. Do not be afraid to sing from the mountain tops “surely it is God who saves

me, trusting him, I shall not fear!" Because people need to hear it. The people in Alexandria need to hear it, the people living on the streets who are losing hope need to hear it, the people on Capital Hill need to hear it and God knows the people in the White House need to hear it. So go out there and tell them. Remember what Fr. Charles said to us last week: "You are whole and holy because of God's promise made to you. You have been anointed in the strong name of Christ and the kingdom of heaven has come near to you. Go share that gift with someone else." Go. Go share that gift and don't be afraid to do so because remember that God is always with you.