

Fear, Ethics, and Identity

A sermon by Jim Kirk

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Behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested him, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

He said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?"

He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

He said to him, "You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live."

But he, desiring to justify himself, asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus answered,

"A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who both stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead.

By chance a certain priest was going down that way.  
When he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

In the same way a Levite also, when he came to the place, and saw him,  
passed by on the other side.

But a certain Samaritan, as he travelled, came where he was. When he saw him, he was moved with compassion, came to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.

He set him on his own animal, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, and gave them to the host, and said to him, 'Take care of him. Whatever you spend beyond that, I will repay you when I return.'

Now which of these three do you think seemed to be a neighbor to him who fell among the robbers?"

He said, "He who showed mercy on him."

Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

— The Gospel of Luke, Chapter 10, verses 25–37

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September, 1912, in Forsyth County, Georgia, a young woman, Mae Crow, was found in the woods, beaten over the head, bloody and unconscious, and reportedly raped. After two weeks in a coma, she died.

Four black people were arrested for the rape and beating of Mae Crow; a man named Rob Edwards, his wife Jane Daniel, her brother Oscar, aged 18, and their 16 year old cousin Ernest.

After being arrested, Rob Edwards was dragged from the county jail, this action abetted by the sheriff, although the deputy did try to stop it. He was dragged around town by a mob, lynched and shot multiple times.

After a one day trial, Oscar and Ernest were convicted by an all white jury, and hanged outside of town with 5,000 people watching the execution in a festive atmosphere reminiscent of a County Fair.

The night of Mae's funeral, bands of white men, "Night Riders", went out to "punish" the entire black community. They burned black churches and black-owned homes, they fired into cabins. They posted warnings stating blacks had 24 hours to leave.

Over the next two months virtually all of the 1,098 black residents were driven out of the county, a purge that lasted almost 100 years.

There were no arrests or prosecutions for the whippings, the lynchings, the shootings — any of the violence perpetrated by whites. This was the Jim Crow South.

Many of these people were otherwise common as rain, you probably wouldn't think twice about having them as your neighbor. Yet they lived in fear. Fear of rumored violence. Fear of people who looked different from themselves. Fear of a race war.

Fear drove these whippings, these lynchings, these murders. Certainly there were other elements, a culture of racial hatred and bigotry, but underlying it all, the foundation, was Fear. Fear drove the people who perpetrated this violence. Fear drove the people who by their inaction allowed it to happen. And fear cast its ugly shadow for nearly a century.

As Franklin Delano Roosevelt said in his inaugural address, "the only thing we have to fear — is fear itself.

Across the Chattahoochee River in Hall County, there was a similar wave of white terrorism and attempts to drive out the black community.

But there was a difference. In the first week of the violence, arrests were made. The newspaper had the courage to publish the names of the Night Riders. They were tried, convicted, and sentenced to jail time.

The Hall County sheriff said they managed to, quote, "crush this thing in its infancy."

In one county a wave of white terrorism went unpunished, spread, and lasted almost one hundred years. On the other side of the river, courage, and the Rule of Law stopped it in its tracks.

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Fortunately, today, most of us have relatively little to fear in our society. We will never be driven to actions such as occurred in Forsyth County. For most of us, we will never be driven by fear to commit such atrocities.

We will never fear for our lives and communities as the black residents of Forsyth County surely did. But there are other challenges, other fears — and they can change our perspective, lead us to actions we otherwise wouldn't contemplate. Fear is a powerful motivator.

MOST of us here today are citizens of this country, either by birth or by naturalization. We are very privileged, we Americans. Our military might and economic power span the globe. We live in a land of relative plenty, of relative wealth, of relative ease, of relative freedom. These things all make it relatively easy to be ethical.

MOST of us here today are Caucasian. We are very privileged, we white people. We don't have to fear for our lives when stopped by the police. We aren't put under extreme scrutiny when we board an airplane. Choosing a neighborhood in which to live, or even walking down the street is less complicated for us.

MOST of us here today are heterosexual. We are very privileged, we straight people. We have always been able to marry the person we love and enjoy all the legal ramifications that brings. We do not live in fear of

being rejected, beaten or murdered if we slip up and share a secret at the wrong time, with the wrong people.

MOST of us here today are comfortable with the bodies we were born with. We are very privileged, we cis-gender people. We don't fear losing our jobs simply because of who we are. We have always been able to dress as we want, to look as we want, to use the restroom we want, without the fear of being rejected, beaten or murdered if we slip up and share a secret, or even if we don't look quite "right" to some people.

About half of us here today are male. We are very privileged, we men. We don't fear being followed, being raped, being murdered, when we go out jogging. We have it easier when we apply for jobs or bank loans, getting raises or promotions at work or running for political office. We are paid more for the same work. Being respected comes naturally to us in our society.

I could go on...

MOST of us here today are middle class. Most of us do not worry where our next meal will come from, whether we can afford medical care, if we can pay next month's rent or mortgage.

MOST of us here today are fully abled. Most of you can hear me without needing a hearing aid, most of you can see me, most of us can stand up and walk on our own two legs. Most of us don't worry about needing assistance in case a fire alarm goes off.

Yet there are challenges, and we have struggled, struggled against fear, struggled to do better.

We have struggled for racial equality, from Civil War era Abolitionists to the Civil Rights Movement of the Sixties, to today's Black Lives Matter movement, and the struggle is not over yet.

We have struggled for sexual equity, from the Suffragette Movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the Women's Rights movement of the 1960s and 70s, to the third wave movement of the 1990s, and the struggle is not over yet.

We have struggled for gay and lesbian rights, from The Society for Human Rights in Chicago in 1924, to the Stonewall riots of 1969, to legalized same-sex marriage in 2004 in Massachusetts and the entire country in 2015, and the struggle is not over yet.

We are currently struggling for Trans-gender rights, and the struggles will continue.

And for marginalized people, the Others, the NOT so very privileged, all the various groups who have struggled for acceptance and equality, who have dealt with fear simply because of who they are, the struggle has not been alone.

There have been outsiders to these groups; family, friends, supporters, allies—people with enough empathy and sense of justice to see that the privilege accorded to themselves should be accorded to others — that in fact, there should be no privilege at all.

People who may never have lived with the fear, the oppression that some have. People who realize that the concept of "other" should not be a barrier to Unity.

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And yet, fear can still divide us, and I have seen this personally, and that is what prompted me to think about this topic, in a very personal way.

Certainly there are reasonable, rational fears — the black residents of Forsyth County had a very rational fear of a very real threat — and sadly, many groups have had to develop methods for dealing with them.

Today many black parents have The Talk with their sons, or even their daughters; "Don't wear a hoodie. Don't try to break up a fight. Don't talk back to cops. Don't ask for help." Teaching them how to appear non-threatening, how to respond to a well-armed but fearful Police Officer so they (hopefully) don't get shot.

Many women don't go out at night alone, plan their jogging in groups, carry pepper spray.

Many people claim a false nationality, because they, or their parents, or even their grandparents, are from a country that our leaders have declared a source of terrorism, legitimizing fear, and even violence against them.

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This current election cycle has been one filled with fear, but if you hark back to 2008, many Republicans were afraid of Obama becoming President. Remember the cries of "Treason!" "Terrorist!" "Kill Him!" The racial epithets at McCain-Palin rallies.

Republicans "feared for our country". There were questions about Obama's birth certificate, fear that he wasn't American, fear of who he was. Fear that he was going to take peoples' guns away. Fear he was weak on foreign policy. Fear about who he might appoint to the Supreme Court. Fear because he was Black.

Of course the cooler heads on the Democratic side knew it was all nonsense. One person, even as President, can't destroy the country — can't repeal the Constitution. Still, that fear has done much to divide this country, and that is tragic.

But in recent months I see a similar fear — and similar rhetoric — within Democratic circles. And I see it dividing this country even more, into smaller and ever smaller factions.

I get e-mails, I read articles, I see the news.

Over and over again the number one message is Fear The Republican Candidate, and they're touting fear of apocalyptic proportions. It's the "End of Civilization as We Know It", the "End of America", the "total destruction of our country", "a world in chaos".

These aren't just fancy, emotional expressions I'm making up, these are quotes I've read.

I hear this from the paid political hacks who spam me for contributions, I hear it from TV and newspaper pundits — and I expect that from people who profit from stoking fear — but more disturbingly, I hear it from acquaintances and friends, people who have bought into this fear.

And out of all this fear comes the message — vote for the Democratic candidate, simply as a vote AGAINST the Republican, to avert this catastrophe — I'm told that voting FOR a candidate who reflects my highest aspirations for this country is selfish and useless. A vote based on Fear versus a vote based on Hope.

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When I asked exactly what catastrophe might plausibly, realistically happen if the Republican candidate were to win, a very dear friend replied, and I quote, "I don't know, and I don't want to know."

This is what fear looks like. "I don't know."

This is what fear looks like. "I don't want to know."

And I refuse to buy into that Fear.

And even though I have no intention of voting for the Republican candidate, I get cautions and pleadings from friends ranging from kind-hearted cajoling to "don't you realize the danger you'll put [Muslims / gays / trans-

gender people / Mexicans / women / your favorite minority] in if you don't vote for who I tell you to?" with the implication, both covert and overt, that as a privileged straight white male, I may be motivated by the luxury of being safe from any perceived consequence.

And with fear driving, it expands and evolves. If I do not tow the exact same line, I am no longer a supporter, no longer an ally. I must praise one candidate. I must disparage the other candidate. No skepticism is tolerated. No alternatives. My intelligence, my rationality, my ethics are questioned. And I don't think my friends would normally do that. I hear the Fear speaking.

And sadly, again and again, I see that fear shutting down any possibility of dialogue, and I get the impression that much of that is based on their perception of my identity...

Identity seems to be inextricably entwined with these issues. Whom we fear. Whom we side with. Whom we allow to side with us.

So the question I'm posed — what IS my identity? Who am I? And from some of the points of view I've read and heard from people, from friends, the underlying question is really "who am I, a member of the Traditional Patriarchy, the Power Demographic, to think I can understand what it's like to have been born a woman, or a person of color, or a gender-queer person, or any marginalized individual?"

But I think that misses the mark.

There's a saying that in order to understand someone, walk a mile in their shoes. There is wisdom in that, and part of the wisdom is that you don't have to BE that other person. You don't have to have experienced their entire life's journey, to have worn their skin, NO ONE can do that.

But you do have to share some similar part of their story.

Is it unreasonable to believe that a person who has felt the prejudice of being rejected for a home loan because she is a single mother can identify with a man who has been rejected for a job because he is black?

Is it unreasonable to believe that a person who has been beaten up because they are gay can empathize with a person driven out of their neighborhood because they are Muslim?

Is it unreasonable to believe that a refugee who has lost a family member in a Drone strike can empathize with a black mother whose son was killed by a police officer?

We each have a unique story, yet there can be similarities. Not identical, but close enough to honestly understand the pain, the frustration, the fear.

In his book, "In the Name of Identity, Violence and the Need to Belong", Amin Maalouf explains that there are many ways, many levels, many facets, of identification. And these modes of identity are fluid, intertwined and ever-changing. They depend on history and on circumstance.

So, as they say, "here's where it gets personal".

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Starting out with the easy stuff, here are some of the identities I have:

I'm left handed. That may not sound like a big deal, but it's amazing how much in our civilization and culture is preferential to being right handed. There are machines and utensils that can be awkward or downright dangerous for left handed people. School desks, kitchen appliances, scissors, power tools.

Is it the equivalent of being a person of color? Of being a woman? Of being gay?

Of course not, but it does afford a hint of the sort of pervasive and largely unseen prejudice that many people live with and others simply take for granted. Being left handed gives me a little insight into that.

I have no stereoscopic depth perception because I'm blind in one eye.

I've worn glasses since I was four years old, so I was always "four eyes" (even if one of them didn't work so well).

I was never interested in or good at sports, in large part due to my vision handicap, and I was a skinny kid, so there was taunting for that, including being called faggot (even though I'm not, no offense), and I've been beaten up multiple times, so yes, I know what that feels like.

My family moved half-way across the country at just about the worst age for a kid to try to "fit in" with a new neighborhood, new school, new bullies. That, combined with my non-interest and lack of skills in sports, my interest in non-standard things for kids, like science and engineering, ensured I was always an outsider in just about everything, so yes, I know what that feels like.

I've been clinically depressed.

I've been suicidal.

I've been raped. More than once.

So yes, I know what that feels like.

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Those are some of the cornerstones of my life's journey, some of the foundational elements by which I identify myself. Which is why I personally don't really identify with being a powerful Patriarch. I identify with being an outcast, a minority, a broken vessel, a reject.

That is where my empathy lies. That is why I seek to be an ally to the oppressed, the broken, the rejected, the Other. But — if I am expected to abandon my ethics to someone else's fear, then that doesn't feel to me like being an ally, that feels like being a hostage.

I present myself as an example, simply because I'm the only person I know so intimately, just as YOU are the only one who knows YOU so thoroughly. And when I look at you, I can see your skin color, your height, and maybe glean some rough approximation of other physical attributes, but that is only the most superficial part of YOUR story.

And this is where I see a problem in what's known as "Identity Politics". It uses a very broad brush to paint us with. Or more accurately, we use very broad brushes to paint each other. Black, Brown, White. One percent. 99 percent. Male, Female. Straight, Gay.

Even with our expanding vocabulary for gender, ethnicity, ableness — while the terms can be useful in certain applications — we still lose the Individuality of our Lives.

And when we don't see, or can't see, or won't see, the details, the varying circumstances of people's lives, we make assumptions. We make assumptions about how others view us. About how others view themselves. About how others view their world.

Each of us is different, yet each of us is human.

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In the Bible parable we began with, the man who fell among robbers is in need. A Levite and a priest, both Jews, like the man who was robbed and beaten, ignore him.

Why?

The priest, in strict accordance with the letter of the Law does not want to become unclean by touching someone who might have blood on him. He is afraid and so concerned with the image of his Priestly position that he leaves the man to die.

Likewise the Levite, an expert in the Law, does not consider the man his neighbor, doesn't identify with him, has no empathy. He fears the robbers might still be lurking and passes by.

Finally, the Samaritan. Now, it is important to know that at the time, the Jews hated the Samaritans and the Samaritans hated the Jews, and this glaring point was not lost on Jesus's audience. And yet, in the parable, it was the Samaritan who went out of his way to help the man.

Why?

Certainly not because he was a Jew, if he even knew or cared about that. Perhaps the Samaritan had been in similar circumstances himself and knew the danger, could empathize with the fear the man felt, understood the possible outcomes, and took action.

Perhaps the Samaritan simply identified with him as One Human Being to Another.

He was brave enough to do what he saw as Right.

As Jesus said, "Go and Do Likewise."

Amen. And Blessed Be.