

*Sermon for 6 Easter, Year B
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In our Psalm today we sang, “Let all the earth fear the Lord”. And yet we hear in St. John’s first epistle that “perfect love casts out fear.” So what’s going on here? Are we supposed to be afraid or not?

We know from Psalm 111 that “the fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of wisdom.” This is just good common sense. God is very powerful. He could hurt you. A lot. Think of other powerful things. Try fire. We all know that fire is necessary to our survival. It keeps us warm and cooks food, so that we don’t get sick. Fire is a good thing. But for the very same reasons it is good, it is also dangerous. Only a fool does not fear fire enough to treat it carefully and with respect. The same thing is true of a weapon. Weapons are good. They protect us from those who seek to harm us. But only a fool does not fear his weapon enough to treat it carefully and with respect.

Now God is much more powerful and (in human terms) much less predictable than fire or a weapon. They are simply powerful tools. But God is the creator of everything that is. Although many of us like to use him as a tool, he is not one. He is the master of the entire cosmos, whether that cosmos recognizes it or not. And only a fool does not fear his master enough to treat him carefully and with respect.

So wisdom begins when we fear the Lord enough to treat him carefully and with respect. But that is not the end of wisdom. It is only the beginning. The man who gets stuck treating God with mere care and respect will wind up in a kind of nervous ritual piety that cannot see God for all the crossings and genuflections and ritual proprieties. Or, if he inhabits a more protestant culture, he will end in a judgmental, moralistic stance that cannot see God for all the rules and regulations and hand-wringing about the state of society.

True wisdom only *begins* with the fear of the Lord. Because true wisdom is able to see that the master is the one who deserves respect. He himself is far more important than any rules he may give us. He himself is far more important than any rituals we may use to express our respect. True wisdom is able to see the truth clearly. And the truth is that this master is not only someone to be feared for his power but also held in awe for his goodness. God is not only the one who “gathers up the waters of the ocean as in a water-skin”, but also the one who “loves righteousness and justice”, whose loving-kindness “fills the whole earth.”

In fact, this God who is our terrifying master is also the absolute source of all goodness. He is so good that St. John can say, “God is love.” That is, God can

be identified with the desire for our welfare, and the welfare of all creation. He wants everything to be perfect for us.

But we mess it up. It can't be perfect, because we're not perfect. So what does this God who is love do? He works through millennia of human history to set up the people, the place, and the time for him to come take care of it himself. From Noah to Abraham, to Joseph, to Moses, to David, to the prophets, to the exile, to the return, to Mary and her husband, Joseph the carpenter. And then God the Son, eternally begotten of the Father, gave up everything to become one of us, to show us the love of God by dying a shameful agonizing death, the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins", "so that we might live through him." And now that we know God has loved us so much, we can love in the same way and be restored to perfection.

Jesus condescends to love us in this way, but it is not what we would call a condescending love. It is not a charity that puts down, but a charity that raises us up. Those who obey commands are usually called servants. But Jesus tells us, "You are my *friends* if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but ... all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you." We do not merely obey orders. What began in fear has grown into friendship, companionship with the living God who created the universe.

And we did not have to initiate that friendship. We never could have initiated it. "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you ...". God himself has chosen each and every one of us and laid down his life for us in the greatest act of love that anyone can accomplish. As companions of the Lord, we now follow him and lay our lives down for him and for each other. Because that's just what this band of brothers called the church does. That's how we know we are companions of Christ Jesus.

But we don't get there by merely following orders. We get there by love. We never lose the awe and respect for God that started us on the road of wisdom. But if we are even beginning to be wise, we then understand how much God loves us. Or rather, we understand that the love of God is so great that it is beyond our understanding. "We love, because he first loved us." And in that love, we no longer have any fear of what God might do to us. We know that whatever he calls us to do or to go through will be the exact perfect thing that is best for us.

Jesus is our commander, but he is also our blood brother. He gives us his life-blood in every Eucharist. He restores our relationship with God our Father. If that isn't worth more to us than anything else possibly could be, then we shouldn't be here. But if it is, then there is no longer any question of our not sticking with

Jesus. And sticking with him means loving each other, giving up our rights, and looking for his direction in our lives.

That's what it means to "abide in God's love." It is also the path of peace and the fullness of joy.