

Advent 02 B 2017  
December 12, 2017 :: Mark 1: 1-8  
Fr. Jim Cook

## *“Is it Love or Fear?”*

Every year, on the second Sunday in Advent, the star of our gospel reading is John the Baptist. He was this larger than life character, who cast a shadow nearly as long as Jesus', and who was fearless when speaking truth to power. In fact, it was that fearlessness that cost John his life.

During his public ministry, John was a very popular teacher and preacher, and people came to him from far and wide to hear him, and be baptized by him. But John's main job, according to the four gospel accounts of him — the main purpose of his ministry — was to point to Jesus.

When Leonard Bernstein, the famous orchestra conductor, was asked which instrument in an orchestra was most the difficult to play, he responded:

“The second fiddle. I can get plenty of first violinists, but to find someone who can play the second fiddle with enthusiasm — that's a problem;

[but] if we have no second fiddle, we have no harmony.”

And that’s what John the Baptist did; I mean, he could have been a *rock star*, but he was content to play the “second fiddle” to Jesus. And I have long wondered what enables people to do that.

Many years ago, I stumbled across a book entitled *Conversations With God*. As the title suggests, the book is a transcription of a series of conversations the author purportedly had with God. In all honesty, the first hundred pages or so were pretty wonderful, but thereafter it was (in my mind, at least) *all crazy talk*. But within that first hundred pages I came across a quote “from God” that simply rang true in my mind and in my heart, and quite literally transformed how I interacted with people. And this is that quote:

“All human actions are motivated at their deepest level by one of two emotions: fear or love. ... There is no other human motivation, and [any other motivations you can think of are] derivatives of

these two ... they are simply different versions — different twists — on the same theme.”

It would be hard to overstate how important this revelation, this principle, really has been in my ministry. Because I can now look at the behavior of people — like parishioners, neighbors, friends, even politicians — and ask the question “Is that behavior more likely to be grounded in fear or love?” And how I answer that question can determine how I might respond to that behavior. And so, when I look at someone like John the Baptist, and ask that question of him, it becomes clear to me that he is behaving out of love — out of a love for God, perhaps even out of a love for Jesus — and that’s what enables him to play “the second fiddle” to Jesus.

However, I am aware that one of the dangers of asking questions like this — you know, “Are they acting out of love or fear?” — is the temptation (or the risk) of assigning a moral or ethical quality or value to one or the other. But I strive to not do that. And I am *also* not saying that love-based actions are inherently better than fear-based, because I have seen great good *and* great evil come from both.

But having said all that, it does seem to be that acting from love does generally seem to be the harder of the two choices. Because love-based actions almost always seem to require a conscience effort, while fear-based actions almost always seem to be reactive, or instinctive, with little forethought put into the whole matter. And, what's more, there needs to be a reason for choosing love-based actions. And so I wondered what might that reason be?

Well, at about the same time as I discovered that quote from *Conversations With God*, I also discovered a quote from another book. That other book was entitled *Servant of the Bones*, by Anne Rice. And while it wasn't a crazy book like *Conversations*, it was still a weird book. Nevertheless, I was pleasantly surprised to find a very insightful argument for doing good, and this is it:

There is one purpose to life ...  
to bear witness to  
and understand as much as possible  
of the complexity of the world –  
its beauty,

its mysteries,  
its riddles.

The more you understand,  
the more you look,  
the greater is your enjoyment of life  
and your sense of peace.

That's all there is to it.  
Everything else is fun and games.

If an activity is not grounded  
in "to love" or "to learn,"  
it does not have value.

Always, if you have a choice, be kind.  
Remember the poor, the hungry, and the miserable.  
Always remember the suffering, and those in need.  
The greatest creative power you have... is to help others.  
To ease pain and give joy are your finest powers.

Kindness is a human miracle, so to speak.

It's unique to us humans ... to be kind.

Why is it so important to love and to learn?

For a cruel, stupid man

this would be a sufficient answer:

It is the *safest* way to live life.

For a great man this would be an answer:

It is the *most rewarding and illuminating* way

to live life.

For a selfish, blind person:

It will bring you the *greatest peace* in the end

if you remember the poor, the hungry, the oppressed,

if you remember others, if you love, if you learn.

To the oppressed themselves, the answer is:

It will *alleviate your pain*, your terrible pain.

Although I would probably *not* recommend this book to a parishioner, I still find it hard to disagree with the notion that the greatest creative power we have is to help others; that to ease pain and give joy are our finest powers; that kindness is a human miracle. These are thoughts and words that I think even Jesus could utter.

For all people on a spiritual journey, I believe God wants us to truly consider what it is that motivates us — fear or love, or even some combination of the two — and to spend time in prayer and meditation learning the truth.

And when we discover that some of our actions are motivated by love, to pray to God to help us continue. And when we discover that some of our actions are motivated by fear, that we pray to God to have the courage to have more trust in love; to pray to have more faith in God.

And though, as I said before, I don't believe that we should necessarily ascribe a moral or ethical quality to either fear or love, or the actions we take because of them, I do believe that love-

based actions have a greater capacity to produce life-giving, hope-nurturing, and faith-empowering ends.

In the end, I believe that God wants us to be aware of what we're doing, and why we're doing it. Because in this way, perhaps like John the Baptist, we can give more help to more people.

Amen.