

Giving Sunday - November 11, 2018
Lectionary 32 (B)
25th Sunday after Pentecost

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Portland, Oregon

Aaron: Melinda, I don't know if you've noticed, but the sort of junk mail that arrives at our house has been changing over the years. Instead of mailings for kids' summer camps and youth sports programs, now we're getting mailings about retirement seminars and "What You Need to Know about Social Security." Are you thinking about retiring right now?

Melinda: Not me! I am totally committed to being these peoples' pastor. How about you?

Aaron: Well, me too, of course. But there's something I've noticed about all those mailings. There are a lot of people who seem to want to really stoke my fears about whether I have enough. Do I have enough insurance? Do I have enough retirement savings?

Melinda: Now you're starting to get me a little worried... Those are big questions!

Aaron: Sure they are. But I find it interesting, and maybe a little sad, how all our feelings of uncertainty and our worries about the future can end up getting focused on money. It's as if we imagine that money could deal with all of the uncertainties in life.

Melinda: Well, we know that's not true.

Aaron: I suppose it's just that money provides an illusion of security. We imagine that, with enough money, we won't need to be afraid of anything. There's no way of taking the uncertainty out of life. But there is a way to lean into God's love in the midst of every situation we face.

Melinda: This fall we've been working with the theme "**Fear Not**" — and we've identified so many ways that fear is being stoked in our common life. It seems like anxiety is everywhere:

M: We're afraid of guns

A: Or guns being taken away

M: We're afraid of enemies

A: Or even friends and relatives, when they cancel out our votes

M: We're afraid of Republicans

A: Or Democrats

M: Radical Muslims

A: and Radical Christians

M: We're afraid of criminals

A: or of the police

M: We're afraid of strangers and immigrants and outsiders

A: Or afraid of those crowds screaming hate toward strangers & immigrants & outsiders

M: We're afraid of fake news,

A: We're afraid of the truth

M: We're afraid of change

A: And we're afraid of things staying the way they are right now

Melinda: There's just a whole lot of fear being marketed around these days. And I've come to believe that defying the power of fear is an important act of resistance. It is essentially a spiritual act. Defying fear is one way to stand up for God's values of love and hope and peace—and say no to powers of hate.

Aaron: God doesn't want us living in constant fear. Because here's what fear does. In physical terms, fear bathes us in stress hormones like cortisol. Fear raises our heart rate, constricts our blood vessels. Fear hooks into the brain's "fight or flight" center. Fear amps up our emotions, and that makes it hard to think clearly.

Melinda: You're freezing my brain just talking about this!

Aaron: Exactly, fear paralyzes our brains. When we are fearful, we don't have the creativity to solve problems. Our world seems smaller. We retreat to what we think is safe-- our tribe, our past.

Melinda: This conversation is helping me realize that fear truly is a dead end. Fear blocks our way forward, it keeps us from actually dealing with whatever we're facing, whether it's a personal problem or something in public life. Fear keeps us from living with open hands and open hearts.

Aaron: Maybe that's why "**Fear Not**" is repeated so many times in the Bible. It's a beautiful refrain. When God's people were sent away to exile in Babylon, hundreds of miles from everything they knew, at the mercy of people who had overrun their country, God sent them words of comfort and strength: "*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.*"

Melinda: This message of "**Fear Not**" means so much to me personally. I've shared with some of you that there are times when I wake up in the middle of the night, and for whatever reason, I'm anxious. You might know the feeling. Maybe I'm worried for family, or disturbed by a recent event, or just unsettled. And one thing I do is sing that beautiful chant to myself "*Do not fear, I have redeemed you....*" It helps me feel God's presence in a deep and personal way.

I truly know one thing: We will never find life's meaning in fear. We only find life's meaning in trust. Trust in God who knows us and loves us, no matter what. God watches with us through the busy hours of each day and the dark hours of each night.

In my experience "**Fear Not**" is not about denying that anxiety is real, or pushing it under somehow and pretending to be just fine. "**Fear Not**" is about giving my life to God and asking God to help me work things through. Trusting God to show me the way and give me strength.

Aaron: It helps to remember that we are not the first generation of believers who have faced turbulent and confusing times, and we won't be the last. Christians have lived through slavery, violence, poverty, every kind of danger – and God never stopped giving them what they needed to live with courage and confidence and hope.

Melinda: I can't help but think about the two widows who we heard about in scripture today. They knew something about being free from fear and living in a joyful and bold way.

Aaron: You would think those two widows would have been completely taken over by fear. The widow in Zarephath was desperately poor, and there was a famine, and she was out of everything. She told the prophet Elijah that she was getting ready to make a final meal for herself and her son. After that she expected they would starve to death.

But Elijah invited her to trust God to provide. She took her last bit of flour and the last bit of oil and made a small cake and cooked it on the fire to share with Elijah, and amazingly his promise held true. Somehow her flour and oil never did run out all during that famine, and she and her family had enough to survive. Her trust took her to a new place of life and blessing. Her brave generosity was met by God's even greater generosity.

Melinda: Then there was the widow that Jesus saw making her gift at the temple. She was also very poor, she didn't have much and didn't count for much. She certainly knew about fearing for her survival, but she didn't choose to live in "survival mode." She found a way to live freely and generously and faithfully. She gave away two pennies, which Jesus said was more than all the sacks of gold given by the rich.

Aaron: Generosity is joyful and freeing. Generosity says: I will not let fear make my life small. I am so grateful for all I have received from God's generous providing, and there is just something in me that wants to be generous in the same sort of way.

Melinda: It's very moving, how Jesus notices this woman and her gift. She might be invisible to other people, but she is not invisible to Jesus. This woman wants to give, and Jesus notices. God notices the gifts we give as well, whether they are gifts of money or gestures of help or caring. Not even the smallest gift goes unnoticed by God.

Aaron: In a very important way, we are very much like those two widows. Being spiritually alive and vibrant people is directly connected to not being stuck in fear, but instead being free and generous and bold.

Melinda: First Immanuel is a "**Fear Not**" kind of congregation. We don't just cautiously hold to how things have always been done. Like James Bash often says, we're willing to try anything once! Right now we're doing neighborhood walks to notice what's changing as the blocks around us are being developed. We're asking what ministry God will lead us to next.

Aaron: We've never been a huge congregation, our finances have never been flush. But God has entrusted us with a big job to do, reaching out to this neighborhood and serving people who really have need. You can only do that with a "**Fear Not**" attitude, trusting that God is in this life we share.

Melinda: One of our members was talking recently about how they've been feeling overwhelmed by the struggles of people living on our city streets. One day they saw a homeless person who really seemed to need assistance, but they were not able to stop and help. It wasn't a situation they could personally enter into. And they regretted that, it was as if it

haunted them. Maybe the rest of us can relate to that. And I want to say that this is when the power of being a congregation enters in. We may not personally be able to give that kind of assistance, but together as a church we can, and we do, every single day. We share our building with the amazing people at Rose Haven who welcome women and children from the street and provide food and showers and clothes and a safe place to be, connecting them with services of all kinds. When you or I feel that yearning to help in some concrete way, please know that by supporting this congregation, you DO help. Together we do what one person cannot do alone.

Aaron: Your generous giving is so important. We are not called to be a savior or to solve all the problems, heal all the ills, but only to be faithful in the little bit we are given and the connections we have – to be a community that makes a difference in this part of the city. We've been doing it for 139 years, and we're not stopping any time soon.

Melinda: As your pastors it is our dearest hope and prayer that First Immanuel will continue to be a **"Fear Not"** congregation—a place of refuge from the pumped-up anxiety that pervades society right now. A place where we draw hope and strength and courage from God's love.

Aaron: Even more than this, a community that boldly and courageously lives out Christ's healing and transforming power. Together we lend our energy to God's work of making this hurting world new. The gifts you pledge, with God's help, will keep this congregation a bold and confident beacon of God's love. Thanks be to God. Amen.