

Jeremiah 20: 7-13
Romans 6: 1b -11
Matthew 10: 26-33

Have No Fear of Them
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Mary R. Brownlow

Three weeks ago, rock climber Alex Honnold became the first person to scale the iconic nearly 3,000-foot granite cliff known as El Capitan without using ropes or other safety gear, completing what may be the greatest feat of pure rock climbing in the history of the sport. Someone went along, with ropes, to document the climb with video, and just watching that film takes a lot of nerve. It is said that other climbers may be Honnold's match physically, but no one else has matched his mental ability to control fear. His tolerance for scary situations is so remarkable that neuroscientists have studied the parts of his brain related to fear to see how they might differ from those of normal people.

Honnold, though, sees it in more pragmatic terms. "With free-soloing, obviously I know that I'm in danger, but feeling fearful while I'm up there is not helping me in any way," he said. "It's only hindering my performance, so I just set it aside and leave it be."

I have to say that I admire that mental discipline: that ability to set aside fear or anxiety or other "hindering" feelings, and just leave it be. I wonder whether it might be one of the important spiritual disciplines as well, a letting go and a focus that would allow us to serve God and neighbor more fully.

Clarence Jordan was a farmer and a Bible scholar. He was troubled by the racial and economic inequality in Georgia in the 20's and 30's, so in 1942 he founded Koinonia Farm, an intentionally interracial community. He is also known for his Cotton Patch paraphrase of the New Testament. Jordan, I think, also had to deal with fearful situations: you might say that he was scaling the sheer wall of prejudice and intolerance. But his reactions were tinged with humor. When he was accused of treason for being too friendly with Myles Horton, a reputed communist, Jordan said "I really have trouble with your logic. I don't think my talking to Myles Horton makes me a Communist any more than talking to you right now makes me a jackass."

Later, when the Koinonia community tried selling peanuts and pecans from a roadside stand to support themselves, the Ku Klux Klan dynamited the stand. Undeterred, Jordan put up another stand. It got blown up too. Finally, the Koinonia Farm resorted to mail-order ads that said: "Help us ship the nuts out of Georgia." Koinonia Farm persevered, with little help against the violence from state authorities. Later, it became the birthplace of Habitat for Humanity.

I admire the courage and conviction of Clarence Jordan: that determination that allowed him to laugh in the face of adversity and keep thinking creatively about how to help the poor, the persecuted, and the homeless. Somehow he found the spiritual discipline to focus on service, not on personal slights or personal dangers.

So – I admire these people, but I do not live in their extreme circumstances. I live in a house in Norwich Vermont, and any climbing I do is just on a regular old path up a hill. Any work for justice I do is buffered by my comfortable and privileged life. Most of us wrestle with the

indecision and fears and perceived snubs that are just the routine part of everyday life, not the challenges of a life of passionate conviction. A life of passionate conviction, we realize, is pretty tough. The writer Donald Miller named this when he said:

"The trouble with deep belief is that it costs something. And there is something inside me, some selfish beast of a subtle thing that doesn't like the truth at all because it carries responsibility, and if I actually believe these things I have to do something about them. It is so, so cumbersome to believe anything. And it isn't cool."

Let's look for a minute at the prophet Jeremiah, who lived a life of passionate conviction back in the 7th and 6th centuries before Christ. He does not respond to threat with focus or with humor: adrenaline and stress are just oozing from his words. First, he shakes his fist at God: "Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed." A strange word: entice. It can have the sense of seduce, allure, persuade, dupe/make a fool of, and deceive. Jeremiah did not want this job at all. He had turned God down the first time it was offered to him, saying that he was too young. Apparently, it was not cool. And whether or not God intended to dupe him, Jeremiah feels that he has been drawn into a vocation that is much more intense and difficult than he had been led to believe. He feels trapped, caught in the middle, squeezed between the agendas of his enemies among the Jerusalem elite and God's agenda. Even if he tries not to speak the words he had been given, it won't work: "within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones."

But Jeremiah is known for his mood swings, not his Zen acceptance of the world as it is. He says, "But." "But the Lord is with me." And then he bursts into song: "Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord!" I've got to say that it's a bit exhausting to even read Jeremiah. I imagine living anywhere near him would have been...very challenging. But, to give him his due, in his lifetime, the world was turned upside down, his enemies were both foreign and native-born, ideologies and theologies seemed to stew in a cauldron of imminent disaster. No wonder he wondered why he had been chosen to speak for God.

When we turn to the Gospel, we find Jesus speaking to the disciples in another tone. In a long passage, he has already told them, "See, I am sending you out like sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." And after describing what these wolves in high places will do to them, he has the audacity to say, "So have no fear of them." Have no fear of them?! Jesus, what are you talking about? I sense cognitive dissonance here.

The Gospel writer Matthew is well aware of the people who had left their homes and their families to spread Jesus' Gospel, the Good News, in a time and a place where that could get a person killed. This is not a denial of danger, but a call to remember to whom we belong. Last week we heard Gerri Higgins sing "His Eye is on the Sparrow," which takes its theme from these verses. In spite of all our fears and doubts, Jesus repeats the old salutation of heaven, used by angels and saints, "Fear not! Do not be afraid! You are of great value." So the key seems to be to take hold of the confidence that comes from being loved without measure. This is a confidence that allows people to notice that fear is hindering our performance, so we can set it aside and leave it be. It is a confidence in the power of God to heal divisions between races, the power of God to use us to lift up the poor. It is the confidence to keep proclaiming healing and compassion and justice even when we meet resistance. And even in our society, where religion sometimes seems to be a private and tamed endeavor, faithful discipleship does sometimes provoke resistance.

Jeremiah's words, harsh and bitter as they may seem to be, still can speak to us of Good News. They allow us to understand the frustration of trying to do the right thing – frustration with God even – that life does not all unfold easily, and that our passionate convictions can get us into trouble. And they allow us to see that Jeremiah's hopes, though tested, come back to rest in God-With-Us, *Emmanuel*. The Lord is with me, says Jeremiah.

Jesus words, gentle and comforting as they may seem to be, still challenge us with the Good News. They soothe us with the ultimate, unconditional love of God, while still sending us out to speak and live the Gospel in an often-hostile world. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "Our only hope lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism." Our only hope rests in the God who has our back, whose eye is on the sparrow, who loves us beyond measure.

So, how will we find both passionate conviction and inner peace without fear? Will we just take Alex Honnold's example and have our impossible goals, set fear aside and concentrate on the next foothold and toehold? Will we be as light-hearted as Clarence Jordan seemed to be when confronted with slander and violence? Will we engage in a practice of contemplation that allows the love of God to soothe and infuse us with confidence and purpose? You will find your way. But the important thing is not to keep what you have found to yourself: not to do try to hold it in as Jeremiah did, with the burning fire shut up in his bones. This reminds me of a Gospel song called "Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Anybody." It's a kind of call and response thing and you can do it. The words are:

Said I wasn't gonna tell anybody
But I (couldn't keep it to myself)
What the Lord has done for me.
Said I wasn't gonna testify
But I (couldn't keep it to myself)
Said I wasn't gonna sing about it
But I (couldn't keep it to myself)
Said I wasn't gonna preach about it
But I (couldn't keep it to myself)
Said I wasn't gonna shout about it
But I (couldn't keep it to myself)
Said I wasn't gonna pray about it
But I (couldn't keep it to myself)

The message today is that, in addition to and in spite of hardship and danger and grief, there is a deep joy in living out God's word. We should not, keep it to ourselves. In prayer and word and action, we should demonstrate compassion and hopefulness. We should not keep our Be the Church banner to ourselves. We should not fear, we should walk in newness of life, as Paul says in his letter to the Romans. We have a great tradition, we have the great Good News of God's love, giving us the power to climb mountains and build community. So have no fear of those who would hinder you.

William Sloane Coffin sometimes used this benediction: "The Lord bless you and keep you, and the Lord's face shine upon you and grant you grace; grace to risk something big for something good." Amen.