

First Mennonite Church Edmonton
“” - Lent 2
March 13, 2022
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I remember the first time I went to prison. It was a cold December evening. The prison wall was a tall blank face, except for lights mounted at regular intervals, and a small doorway which we were to enter there was nothing that would indicate what was inside.

Approaching the door we had to wait for them to slide open the iron gate. Once in there we had to wait for it to close behind us before the gate ahead of us opened. Arriving in the lobby we had to submit our identification, and be checked off a list. We had our jackets taken, and any sweaters with hoods. We had to empty our pockets. We then walked through a metal detector, and had to line up and wait for the narcotics dog to give us the all clear. After all this then we were led through another set of double doors, and finally into the visiting area.

Film and television might exaggerate the sounds of prison doors opening and closing, but to hear it in real life brought home the finality of it all. When you were behind this doors, you were inside. The sound of the door locks engaging was heavy, cold and hard. It was intimidating to say the least. Here we go I thought, I was now locked in for the next two hours. The worry, the anxiety, the nervousness I felt was only a prelude to the fear that I would soon feel, as I met my first inmate face to face. So what was I doing?

I was in prison because I had volunteered to participate in a prison visitation program called Person 2 Person, here in Alberta it's know and M2M, W2W, Man to Man, Woman to Woman. Person 2 Person is a restorative justice program connecting inmates with citizen volunteer visitors, with the hope that these relationships have a positive effect on the inmates rehabilitation. Studies have shown that it does reduce recidivism and that inmates tend to have improved behaviour for the duration of their incarceration with these connections.

I knew that in my mind, I knew that the person I was about to meet wanted to be a part of this program, but that was in my mind, and it was trying hard to ignore the pounding in my chest of my heart racing. When all of us volunteer visitors entered the visiting room we were the only ones there, and we each found a place to sit. Chairs were set on opposite sides of clear tables, presumably if inmates tried to pass anything to the volunteers it would be noticed by the guards and the multiple video cameras. Many volunteers went to where they usually sat, while those of us who were first timers, looked for a place. Once we were seated we heard that same cold hard sound as another door lock disengaged, and the inmates were let in.

Some started quickly scanning the room looking for their regular visitor. Others waited. The coordinator then brought one of the inmates over and introduced Tony to me. I could sense his nervousness. Curious how it is that when we meet new people, anxiety, or perhaps suspicion is one of the first strongest emotions.

Tony and I couldn't have been further apart. Tony was tall, stalky, heavily tattoo'ed. His face and hands were weathered from a hard life, and I was not sure if that was from being on the inside or from the outside. Tony was serving a sentence for sexual misconduct with a minor, and he had a tough look about him. Normally, I would never associate with him in any other setting. I wouldn't want anything to do with him. If I were to meet him on the street I would go about avoiding him. I was intimidated. I didn't know what to do. Because of my fear, my mind was racing, and only one question was coming to mind, "What were we going to talk about?" At that point, I wasn't sure I wanted to be there.

This morning our worship material is inviting us to move from a place where fear dictates our actions to a response of compassion. We'll find out in a bit what happened between Tony and I. First let's turn to our scripture. Our scriptures reflect this transformation from fear to compassion. Both the Genesis scripture, which was read for us, and the Gospel scripture which wasn't begin in places of fear, or at least being unsettled, and in both God and Christ respond not out of that fear but from a place of deep compassion.

In the Genesis reading God comes to Abram in a vision with words of assurance, however, Abram doesn't hear these words, he has one thing on his mind, why hasn't God fulfilled his promise chapters ago to grant both him and Sarai a child. Abram his thinking about succession, and realizes that if he doesn't have a child, and soon, he is quite old after all, his only heir is going to be one of his servants. Again, compassionately, gently, God reassures Abram that he is going to father children, and only will he be a father he will be the patriarch for a whole people. Sadly Abram can't hear what God is saying. So God gives him a vision of what will come, but Abram is consumed in his own worry that he can't see what God is showing him. If we read further in to chapter 16 of Genesis we'll see that Abram takes matters into his own hands, there we see Sarai acting out of her own fear, and 'helping' God along in the process by offering her slave, Hagar, to Abram.

The Luke passage, which wasn't read for us this morning, comes from chapter 13:31-35, Jesus is out teaching when some sympathetic Pharisees approach Jesus. Not all of them are bad guys in the story. Anyway, these pharisees fearing for Jesus' life, approach Jesus and warn him, that he needs to leave and quickly, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." Like God, in the Genesis story, Jesus also responds compassionately. Mostly. Sure, Jesus has some hard word for Herod, "Go and tell that fox! I am casting out demons, I'm healing, today, tomorrow and the third day I'll finish my work. And then I'll be on my way." But Jesus defies the fear of the Pharisees, saying, "I must be on my way, because it's impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem."

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" And with almost a little foreshadowing he says "And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

In both of these passages, I see humankind acting, and even reacting out of fear, Abram and Sarai scared that God won't fulfill the promise to help them bear children, the Pharisees worried for Jesus' life, and God and Jesus responding with great compassion and understanding. I've always admired those who can set their fear aside and not act from a place of fear. I'd love to be able to respond from a place of compassion, but sometimes that's really hard to do. So how do we get from one to the other? How do we move from our fear, to a compassionate response. The first step, I think, is to recognize that fear, and what that fear is making us do.

Fear drives us to do strange things. A piece of advice that I was once given was that, "When you act out of fear, you are most likely to create the situation you're most afraid of." Fear has an uncanny way of driving us into that place, or situation, or outcome that we're most scared of. Ironic, because fear is also such a great motivator.

For Abram and Sarai, their fear is rooted in a mistrust of God. God had made a promise to them, but they hadn't necessarily seen God at work, and so they were getting ready to 'help' God along. For a people who like to be in control, this story should be fairly easy to relate to. In many ways our scientific and technological advancements have told us that we are masters

of our own domains. That everything is within our grasp, our control, and we have the ability to effect and affect the world around us. And so, when things are out of our control, we get a bit antsy.

The pandemic has taught us valuable lessons about being out of control. When there's an almost invisible virus circulating around, there's little we can do to reign it in and keep it under control, beyond being vaccinated, wearing a mask, and keeping distance. This virus will move as it will, in an almost unpredictable manor. So when we're a part of a community where some feel that things are still out of control, and others feel that things are back under control, how might we compassionately respond to one another? How might we put nervousness, anxiety, or uncertainty, or dare I say it, fear, into perspective? How might we respond from a place of compassion?

It's not just the pandemic, there are many places where we feel out of control, it feels like low hanging fruit by now, but even when we look at leadership and politics. The decisions and policies that our leaders make, we may not necessarily agree with, we may not understand, we may not completely comprehend why it's happening the way it is.

How often have I heard people say, "Oh it's so simple, we just need to do, this and this and this and this, and the problem is solved." Whether that problem is high fuel prices, high cost of living, or mask mandates, public health mandates or even our armchair assessments of conflicts overseas, with this line of thinking the problems are just so simple. What troubles me in this line of thinking is that it doesn't always take in to consideration the larger picture, the picture that many leaders are working hard to understand.

Fear isolates us in our own thinking because fear is focused on the self. In the Genesis story Abram and Sarai's fear is focused on their family name, their family inheritance, their family heir. In the Luke passage the focus is on the Pharisees not wanting Jesus to be killed. They don't want their teacher to be murdered.

And in many of our situations, we're focused on what will solve or ease our own fear and worries. At its most primal our fear is trying to answer the question "What can I do to get out of this situation, solve this problem, or ease this discomfort?" It's trying to gain control in a situation where we have no control. Except we do. We have control in how we respond. We can either respond from our place of fear, or we can take God and Jesus' example and find another way.

Going back to my prison experience. My prison experience didn't end with me sitting terrified with Tony for 2 hours. Tony surprised me. What I didn't immediately realize was that Tony was scared too. Relationships in prison are not always benign. Most are commodified. So Tony had his guard up. But as we starting talking, we starting learning more about each other. As I listened, and learned more about the Tony I realized something. Something took away my fear.

I started to see the human being behind the facade. I started to see the person and I realized that we had much in common. We had common interests, and we had common faults. I soon realized that we weren't all that different. Had I had made a few choices differently in my own life, I might be finding myself in the same place as Tony. As I realized this, I found my heart opening to this tattoo'd tough looking man, and I began to see him as a human being, who's future has been all but written for him.

His future is one that is filled with court appearances, reports to parole officers, observation, counselling, and restrictions on behaviour, and travel. In addition to all that, his future will also be one filled with sideways glances, suspicion, registration as a sexual offender, and perhaps even public ridicule, shaming, alienation, and worst of all discrimination. He described to me

how friends have deserted him, how his parents have alienated him, how his wife is seeking a vicious divorce, which all but forbids him to see his three children, and how there are only few trusted people in his life.

As I sat with Tony that night, as we played cards and chatted, asked me something that was like a grenade exploding in front of me. He asked me, given what he had done, if he would ever be able to go to church again?

I bumbled my way through an explanation that essentially said God is gracious, but 8 out of 10 churches will probably ostracize you, and you will have many no's before you find a congregation that will welcome you, and even then you'll probably have restrictions placed on you, either by conditions for parole, or by the congregation, in the name of public safety.

As I said this felt compassion for him. Realizing how difficult it must be for him to imagine a future where his crime, sentence, and record won't effect every aspect of his life.

My visit with Tony that night answered for me the question of why I was there. I was there to give people like Tony hope. Hope that there are good people who can look past his crime, past his sentence, past his record to see the human being underneath; one who has interests and hobbies, someone who has joys and sorrows, one who longs to see stars again, to cook a meal for himself, and to give his grandmother a hug. Hope, that there still is a life that waits for him outside the bars of the Sask. Penn.

I visited with Tony each month for 2-3 years right up to moving to Edmonton. Each month we sat together two hours, we drank pop, we ate chips and chocolate bars, we played cribbage, and we talked. In that time we held to hope as he was transferred to minimum security from medium, and as he applied for parole, and we commiserated together when that didn't happen. Each month I saw with Tony, and by being there, I remind him that he is still loved, and that he still has value.

So what changed for me? I saw Tony as a person, a human being, not as an inmate. I understood his situation and him, and that softened my heart, that led me to compassion. In our scriptures both God and Jesus understood the anxiety and the worry of the people. God knew how desperately Abram and Sarai wanted a child. Jesus knew how the Pharisees didn't want him dead. God knew that Abram and Sarai were anxious because they couldn't see God at work. Jesus knew that the Pharisees and others weren't in on what Jesus had in mind. God and Jesus were un-anxious, they weren't worried about the outcome in the same way that the people were. And it allowed them to respond with compassion.

Can we do the same? Can we understand? Can we release our fears and be surprised by what God is doing? Can we take the time to understand the situation, and respond rather than react? Can we open ourselves to hear the story of the stranger, like I did with Tony, and see the person in front of us? I hope so, and then with integrity we can affirm with the Psalmist when they say:

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.

Amen