

“How big a God, how big a love?”

October 25, 2008

Text: 1 John 4:16-21, Matthew 22:34-46

I.

Do you like change? Do I like change? Does anybody like change? Probably not—at least, probably not too much and too often. Change creates tension and anxiety.

If that’s true, then we must all be tense and anxious in recent times because change is everywhere. And people fear change. We fear change.

- For a few moments, think how the world we live in has changed dramatically over the past twenty years!!

In many ways, 9/11 was a symbol of the change. It changed the way we view the international world. It used to be that our so-called enemies were other nations (the Soviet Union, for example). Now, our enemies live in remote caves along foreign borders that are even more remote still.

And so, change and the fears that accompany it define our modern situation. We’ve been inundated with change.

- With all that’s happened in the global community, all the change and realignment of centers of power ... and roots of violence ...
- And now, with the collapse of our economy and its ripple effect around the world. Volatility in the world markets is more than a little alarming ... what to do? No easy answers.
- And all the while, we’re closing in on one of the most important and historic elections in our history.

In such times, fear can easily be on the front burner of our lives—fear and an uneasiness about tomorrow. In many ways, not too different from Jesus’ times.

II.

These days—everyday, it seems—we hear talk that suggests the fears people have.

1. We’re worried about our jobs. How can we *not* be worried? Almost daily we read in the paper and hear on TV about the thousands of jobs that are being lost. And many of us are worried, too, about being able to keep our homes. Others are worried about our retirement, our social security and our health coverage.

2. Others, still, are concerned about Amendment 2, on the ballot this year; the so-called *Save Marriage* amendment. The problem with Amendment 2 is that it is too narrow and exclusionary and, if passed, could cause considerable hardship for countless couples that cohabitate.
3. We continue to have fears, too, about global terrorism and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, along with deep concerns, as well, about winning the peace around the world.

In recent weeks, we hear talk of other fears, as well. Fears linked to personal differences—differences in ideas and differences in beliefs.

Sadly, at times, these fears lead people to demonize *the other* (the one who is different)... the *other* ethnic group or religion. And suddenly, this past week, we heard about the *other* America or the *other* part of the state. The *other*, of course, being code language for _____ fill in the blank.

We hear about the *real* America, referring to small town America, where everyone tends to be pretty much the same; and the *other* America, referring to the big cities, where there are all kinds of diversity.

Apparently, in addition to this, there's the *real* Virginia and the *other* Virginia. Which would suggest that there may well be the *real* Florida and the *other* Florida. Obviously, again, this is all code language for differences that make some people uneasy. The larger problem, of course, is that it is divisive.

III.

So, what's this all about? Again, isn't it fear? Fear of those whose way of life, whose beliefs and ideas are simply different from ours? How sad to see our great nation, with our robust diversity; how sad to see us divided up in this way.

But you know what? Not to worry; because we're not buying it. Are you buying it? I'm not buying it. That's not the America we know.

1. That's not the America envisioned by our Founding Fathers ... ***We hold these truths to be self-evident that all people are created equal and that they are endowed with certain inalienable rights ... and that among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.***
2. It's not the America that has brought millions of proud immigrants to our shores over the centuries.
3. Not the America which, at our best, remains, still, a beacon of light and hope to so many people around the world; the America of freedom and opportunity. The

America of kindness, goodness and generosity.

In the letter of 1 John, the Bible says ***There is no fear in love ... but perfect love casts out all fear.*** And the Apostle Paul's famous *love chapter* in 1 Corinthians 13 reminds us that ***love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things.***

IV.

In this 22nd chapter of Matthew, the Jewish elites—this time, the Pharisees—have been trying to trap or trick Jesus into saying something which will give them grounds to have him arrested.

They have already tried the trick question about whether it was lawful to pay taxes to the emperor and the silly question about who belongs to whom in the resurrection. Each time, Jesus has confounded them with his wisdom and cleverness.

So, now this third attempt to bring him down with the question about ***Which commandment in the LAW is the greatest?***

There were hundreds of commandments that were considered part of the LAW. How would Jesus sort all of this out? Well, he didn't delay; without blinking an eye, he went right to LOVE.

To make his point, he combined **Deuteronomy 6:5** with **Leviticus 19:18**:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind ... and your neighbor as yourself.

This is the greatest commandment. And to make sure they *got it*, he reminded them that on this commandment hangs all of the LAW and the PROPHETS. Friends, that's one third of the Bible.

What I like about the greatest commandment is what it asks of us: everything. That's what makes it great. It asks of us all we've got of mind, heart and spirit. What this commandment is about and what our God is about is a BIG LOVE.

How big a God? How big a love? Big enough to rise above our fears—every time and all the time.

V.

I like the story about boxer, gentleman **Jim Corbet**, a former heavyweight champion of the world. Gentleman Jim was reportedly out doing road work one day, in preparation for a fight, when he ran into a fisherman who was having a field day. He was pulling in

the big ones and pulling in the little ones.

However, as he was running by, Corbet noticed something strange: the fisherman was putting the little fish in his crill and throwing all the big fish back in. Wondering what the guy could possibly have been thinking, he asked him about it.

You're the only fisherman I've ever seen, he began, who throws the big fish back in and keeps the little fish. Why are you doing that?

The fisherman sort of shook his head and replied, **man, I hate to do it, but don't have any choice ... you see all I got here is this *little o bitty fryin' pan*.**

Don't we want to shout out: **Get a bigger frying pan?**

At the same time, with regard to all of our fears and worries, God may want to shout out to us: ***Get a bigger faith ... with a bigger love.***

Friends, I know that times are tough ... and that, for many of us, our fears are real. But still, through it all, when we commit our lives to the high ground of the **great commandment**, we will not fall.

When we love the Lord our God with all our ***mind, heart*** and ***spirit***, and our neighbor as ourselves, instinctively, we treat every human being with dignity and honor. We can't help but do this ... because that's what love asks of us.

As Christians and as Americans, God calls us to the high ground of our faith and of our national inheritance. On this high ground, all people are honored and respected. They don't have to look like us ... act like us ... talk like us ... think like us ... believe like us ... live where we do. Diversity is to be celebrated. It enriches the lives of us all and remains a core part of our fundamental greatness as a nation.

VI.

I close with this gripping story which emphasizes the wonderful diversity that is this great country of ours. There was poignant picture in a recent copy of the New Yorker magazine ... a picture at Arlington National Cemetery of a mother pressing her head against the gravestone of her son, a 20-year-old soldier who had been killed in Iraq. Clearly, the mother was grieving her deceased son.

On the headstone were engraved his name and his awards—Purple Heart and the Bronze Star. Above his name, there wasn't a *cross* ... and there wasn't a *Star of David*. There was a crescent and a star to denote his Islamic faith.

His name was **Kareem Rashad Sultan Khan**. He wasn't a Christian; he wasn't Jewish. He was a Muslim. And he was an American who died fighting for his country—our country. Did you know that of our military's 1.4 million troops, 3,700 of them are Muslims?

All the time, we hear expressed fears about people being Arab or Muslim. In other words, about someone, or a group of people, being different.

Aren't we all Americans? Living under the same Constitution? With the same rights and liberties?

Kareem was just a young man ... full of hope and possibilities like most young persons. He loved the Dallas Cowboys ... and he loved to play video games with his 12 year-old sister. Recently, he had sent his family some pictures of him playing soccer with Iraqi children and hugging a smiling young Iraqi boy.

Sadly, tragically, he died when an improvised bomb blew up during a routine house search. Again, he was an American.

VII.

How big a God, how big a love?

- Big enough to be welcoming and affirming of all people ...
- Big enough to show honor and dignity to every human being ...
- Big enough to celebrate our individual differences.
- Big enough to look for the good in all people ... and to never stop trying to bring people together.

Friends, faith in a BIG God with a BIG love is the hope of the world. Because it's that faith that calls us to be peacemakers ... and bridge builders. So that we may all be ONE. Not just here in America but throughout the global community.

O what a day! O what a vision!

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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