



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

The Power Over Fear When We Are Loved For Who We Are

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.

January 10, 2010

I was stopped in my tracks last week by a radio show about how many lives had been saved by the institution of something phenomenally simple in hospitals. The simple solution was borrowed from the airline industry by a surgeon at Johns Hopkins Hospital. It, the simple solution, was having checklists that nurses and physicians went over prior to every surgery. The practice started at Johns Hopkins Hospital surgical unit but then was expanded to the ICU and then throughout the hospital and then the World Health Organization heard about it and started using these checklists in eight of their hospitals sprinkled throughout the world. Two years after the checklist system was introduced at Johns Hopkins, it had already prevented forty-three infections, avoided eight I.C.U. deaths and saved the hospital approximately \$2 million. All eight World Health Organization hospitals saw the rate of major postsurgical complications drop by 36 percent in just the first six months after the checklist was introduced; and in that period of six months deaths fell by 47 percent.

Although the check list finally in its development had nineteen tasks to check off, the remarkable early results at Johns Hopkins were due to an initial checklist of only five things that doctors needed to remember to do when inserting central lines that deliver medications or fluids directly into a major vein to avoid subsequent infection. I'm now going to give you the check list of five things. Turn your thinking caps on now, these are very sophisticated medical tasks: The first thing on the checklist was wash your hands with soap; the second, clean the patient's skin with chlorhexidine antiseptic; the third, cover the patient's entire body with sterile drapes; the fourth, wear a mask, hat, sterile gown and gloves; and five, put a sterile dressing over the insertion site after the line was in. That's it. Checking those items every procedure saved that many lives. And, one-third of the time doctors were skipping at least one of these critical steps. With the checklists they never skipped any.

Dr. Atul Gawande describes all this in his provocative new book, "The Checklist Manifesto." He says, "This obviously raises the distinction between errors of ignorance (mistakes we make because we don't know enough), and errors of ineptitude [or forgetfulness or absent minded-ness] (mistakes we make because we don't make proper use of what we do know)." Failure in the modern world, the author writes, is really about the second of these errors, and he walks us through a series of examples from medicine showing how the routine tasks of surgeons have now become so incredibly complicated that mistakes of one kind or another are virtually inevitable: it's just too easy for an otherwise competent doctor to miss a step, or forget to ask a key question or, in the stress and pressure of the moment, to fail to plan properly for every eventuality. Gawande then visits with pilots and the people who build skyscrapers and other professionals and came back with the same solution. Experts need checklists—literally—written guides that walk them through the key steps in any complex procedure. Gawande thinks that the modern world requires us to

revisit what we mean when we use the word expertise: He argues, “experts need help. Progress depends on experts having the humility to concede that they need help.” (*Malcolm Gladwell's review in The New Yorker magazine,*)

Now, I will tell you what my preacher’s mind did with this information when I heard it on the radio show. I began to think the following: Healthy religious and spiritual people already know what to do and how to be. We don’t make mistakes of ignorance (mistakes we make because we don’t know enough). We religious and spiritual people make errors of forgetfulness (mistakes we make because we don’t make proper use of what we do know) because of the incredibly complex and stressful lives we live and because human beings are all prone to certain degrees of amnesia (forgetting what we do know).

Good church and healthy use of the Bible are about reversing our amnesia, our forgetfulness – reminding us – about the basics on the checklist of what is needful if we are to be fully alive and to be fully human. That is why the Prayer Book’s cycle of scripture readings continually brings us back to the basic points on God’s check list. You and I are never too smart for basic training.

Today, now that the twelve days of Christmas are over and the season of Epiphany has begun we observe this morning the baptism of Jesus and we baptize new people into Jesus’ baptism. What does it mean to be baptized into Jesus’ baptism? It is not about being saved from hell. It is about being told what Jesus was told. What is the first thing on the checklist? What is the wash-your-hands-step on the checklist of being like Jesus? The answer is “Do not fear. You are my beloved.” Keep that in mind. Isaiah 43:1-7 is the Hebrew Scripture passage appointed for today and it reads, “Fear not for I have redeemed you [or it can be translated liberated you or brought you back to your true family or to your true self]; I have called you by name...Fear not for I am with you.” And then the story of Jesus’ baptism is always read this Sunday. God’s voice from heaven said, “You are my Own, Jesus, my Beloved. On you my favor rests.” (Luke 3:21-22)

So my friends, the first thing on the checklist for being a human being fully alive is “Forswear Fear; Fear not; know that you are loved.” Perfect love casts out fear. It is impossible in this world not to have appropriate fears. But the emphasis is on having those fears not becoming your fears. That is the “Jesus difference.” Every time you and I give our God-given, divine energy over to a life-strategy rooted in fear, we will not be able to be compassionate, creative, innovative, and imaginative the way God created us to be. This is because the human brain is so constructed, so brain scientists tell us, that when you and I are very afraid, we cannot think, create, imagine, play, and care for one another and for our young. That is the difference between being human beings and being reptiles. Snakes don’t nurture their young and you cannot play with one. [laughter] The mammalian brain, when it becomes reptilian it chemically cannot think, create, imagine, innovate, play or be compassionate. First rule on the checklist, do not become a snake. Fear not.

You can’t be fearful and loving. You cannot live in the House of fear and the House of love at the same time. You can live in the House of Love and also have fears that come from having a sane and prudent view of the world. But as soon as you give your heart, soul, mind and being over to the house of fear, you are blocking the flow of grace and humanity that God’s spirit is flooding you with every sacred moment of your life. Fear based folks cannot see the sacred that is at stake in every moment.

In the age of 9/11, the Iraq War, the war in Afghanistan, the military and the CIA secret presence with drones in Pakistan and now Yemen, the war on terror, the financial collapse, attempted bombings on airplanes, and Orange Alerts, our society is defined by fear. But we do not have to be defined by fear. Our

life is counter cultural. Three out of four Americans say they feel more fearful today than they did twenty years ago. In a reissue of his ten-year old book called *The Culture of Fear*, USC sociologist Barry Glassner demonstrates that it is our perception of danger that has increased, not the actual level of risk.

Glassner exposes the people and organizations that manipulate our perceptions and profit from our fears, including advocacy groups that raise money by exaggerating the prevalence of particular diseases and other threats like viewing entire classes of people as threats and then there is the entire military industrial complex the profits of which depend on there being a culture of fear. And then there are certain politicians who think that the only way they can win elections is by heightening concerns about death panels, Muslims, crime, drug use, terrorism and the threat to the American family by being inclusive of same-gender relationships and marriages. It is all fear-based hyperbole used to manipulate, and scare us to death (mental-death), and when we give into it it keeps us from thinking and keeps us from being human and being fully alive.

You cannot live in this world where terrorism is the focus of the media and politicians and not be touched by our fear-based culture. However, we can live in a culture of terror without being terrorists ourselves and without letting ourselves become terrorized. “Fear not; you are beloved,” is at the top of God’s check list so that you and I will not become the evil we deplore and so that we who are godparents of these children who today are baptized into Jesus’ House of Love can remind them as we are reminded that they (these children) are not beings of fear but that God has made them to be beings of love. We are called to live in the world of fear but not be of the world of fear so that in turn we can transform the world of fear into the human family living in the house of love. Can I have an Amen? Amen.

So, understand that part of your life will have to deal with terror on our doing level, but do not become terror yourself or become terrorized on your being level. Your being level was created to be about being beloved and the Holy Spirit reminds you that at your core you are love and you are Beloved and everyone else is Beloved.

We are loved for who we are. When we let God’s check list remind us of that we have a new power over fear. The season of Epiphany means to manifest or show forth the divine light that is without you. And during Epiphany we are trained to learn how to “epiph.” And the way we “epiph” is to understand that every person in this room is a physician, not just my doctor who is here, everybody here is a healer – an instrument God has called to be used by God to heal the world and to bring peace to the world.

So remember, our responsibility is to keep that force field around us sterile of anxiety so that divine healing properties of the human body and the human community can work. And please do not get so arrogant as to think that because you have heard this sermon on fear and love that you no longer need church. [laughter] Church is for everybody who has a navel because everybody with a navel gets amnesia in the midst of this busy and complicated world.

So this year, this decade keep coming back to this Table and keep coming back to this Font to be reminded of God’s check list, not because you’re stupid, not because you are ignorant, not because you don’t know how to be, but because you, like surgeons, need to be reminded. So now let’s baptize some children into Jesus’ House of Love.

Amen.