

**February 18, 2018**

**TEXT: I Peter 3:8–15**

**TITLE: Do Not Fear What They Fear**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

Let me begin with some advice that comes straight out of Pastoral Care 101 classes. Students training to become pastors commonly take pastoral care classes while at seminary, or perhaps they serve internships in hospitals or prisons, where a supervisor helps them develop the skills we associate with caring pastors. The advice is this: *Don't be too quick to answer a question posed to you. Instead ask a follow-up question to learn more about what is really troubling the other person.* You're in conversation with someone and at some point you're asked you a question like "What do you think of that?" or "What would you do in that situation?" Now, if you are in a rush or if the question makes you feel uncomfortable, your natural inclination is to provide a quick answer, hoping that will satisfy the person and end the conversation. We've all done this at times. We give a quick response and then say something like "Will you look at the time. I've got to run but let's talk about this later." The better response, whenever possible, is to pause for a moment, and say "You've raise some big questions here. Tell me more about why this is important to you." By answering a question with an open-ended question, you have the chance to truly hear the other person and offer advice with a sympathetic, faithful heart.

That's an important quality for all of us to nurture. During the season of Lent, our worship services focus on the need for repentance, for confessing the ways we do what is wrong and resolving to do what is right. We pray the words found in Psalm 51: *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.* Most of the hard work of Lent happens when we slow down, when we look people in the eyes and really listen to what they are telling us; when we ask them how they're doing—what's really going on—and honestly care about the answers they give us.

That's partly why so many places in the bible have lists of things Christians are to do when they are out in the world interacting with others. The reading we heard from I Peter begins with that language, telling us to *"have sympathy and love for one another; a tender heart and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse, but instead repay with a blessing."* This sounds like a similar passage in Romans 12 that says *"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection and outdo one another in showing honor."* Or like something near the end of I Thessalonians: *"Encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another."*

Why is all this so important? It's important because a humble spirit is a teachable spirit. If you think your cup of wisdom is already full to the brim, then how can God pour a right spirit into you? If your compassion for others doesn't contain room for really listening and changing how you live your life because of what another person describes to you, then your acts of sympathy will be patronizing and superficial. Let me flesh out what I

mean about a teachable spirit by talking about two related topics—racial diversity and the problem of fear.

I recently met an older African American pastor who helps at a church not too far from here. I mentioned I was the pastor at East Liberty Presbyterian Church and then had to explain where we were located. He then quietly asked me whether much was going on at our church, since when he drives by it, it looks empty and inactive. I mentioned, somewhat defensively, that we have a lot going on but since our Penn Avenue doors aren't our main entrance, much of the church's activity may not be visible from the outside. But he was correct in that, from the outside, it can be hard to know whether our church is vibrant or not and that's a problem. Then, a couple days ago, a church member introduced me to a young African American mother who had recently moved from the dilapidated East Liberty Gardens into new subsidized housing right behind Target. Again I was introduced as the pastor of East Liberty Presbyterian Church and again I had to explain where we are. Her response was, "Oh, that church near where those new restaurants are, across the street from Honeygrow." Now, a church as big as ours should be the point of reference for the new restaurants, not the other way around! But that was precisely what is happening and captures the challenge we now face.

If we tell ourselves that our cathedral structure puts us in the center of everyone's map, that is only the voice of false pride and white privilege talking. For many years, the people who came to ELPC for the homeless shelter, food pantry, and Meals on Wheel programs—participants and volunteers alike—mirrored the racial and economic diversity we value here at ELPC. They were the activity that others saw from the outside and knew our church was engaged. They were the folks who knew how to find our doors so that people would geographically orient themselves to our building. All that has changed—and we need to listen to what others are saying. We need to listen to others about how our church can minister within this changing neighborhood. And how will this happen? Only if we are humble and teachable. Our Session is talking a lot about this, but this responsibility falls on all our shoulders. We all need to value diversity of race, economics, sexual identity, and geography here in this place. We all need to invite people to ELPC, welcome all visitors, and show radical hospitality all the time. For the sake of our church's commitment to Christ, in whom there is no division and no hierarchy of privilege, that should be our collective Lenten discipline.

Secondly, there's a powerful verse near the end of the I Peter passage that bluntly says, "*Do not fear what they fear and do not be intimidated.*" Fear is a messy, complicated emotion. By definition it is more irrational than rational. It can show up in response to a real or an imagined danger. And sometimes the fear itself causes more pain than the thing that is feared. Joanna Adams tells the story about two young Texas boys whose mother asked them to chase a chicken snake out of the henhouse. So they went into the dimly lit henhouse and looked everywhere for that snake, but couldn't find it. The more they looked, the more afraid they got. Finally they stood up on their tiptoes to look on the top nesting shelf and came nose to nose with the snake. They fell all over themselves, skinning their knees in their rush to run out of that chicken house. As their mama fixed them up later, she said, "Don't you know a chicken snake won't hurt you?"

“Yes, ma’am,” one boy answered, ‘but there are some things that will scare you so bad you’ll hurt yourself.”

Fear happens for a lot of reasons. However we decide whether or not we’re going to let fear live in our hearts and let it control everything we do.

The news this week has been about the tragic shooting at Parkland School in Florida. Parkland’s name has been added to a crowded list that includes schools like West Nickel Mines, Columbine, and Sandy Hook—and is included alongside other public shootings like in the church in Charleston, the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, the factory in San Bernardino, and the concert grounds in Las Vegas. We are sick to death of this homegrown and nationally-tolerated violence. We feel anger that it happens, frustration that nothing is done, and remorse that in a few days we’ll be talking about something else. Out of fear people talk about safety issues, illogically wanting more guns in more hands to somehow stop gun violence. More walls, more metal detectors and defenses are touted as the answer to our fears. But there’s a fundamental flaw in this argument. Some believe that fear is a signal that we need to pull back and withdraw, when in truth fear is a sign that we have withdrawn too much.

This topic touches on important things that need to be taken seriously and pursued diligently: the need for political reform, campaign reform, and national gun reform. If the election of 2016 taught us anything it was that all elections are important and every vote counts. But in the end, the faithful way forward is just that, a way forward—not backward; it is a way that engages, not withdraws; a way that is humble, teachable, sympathetic, not repaying evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but listening—asking the follow-up question—seeking to understand, support, calm and correct. It’s all there in the bible, in I Peter where it says: All of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another. Do not fear what they fear. Do not be intimidated. Trust Christ as Lord and always be ready to tell anyone about the hope that is in you.

This Lent, this about that last phrase: the hope that is in you. If someone has lost hope and you can listen and share, even imperfectly, about your hope and faith in Christ, then find a way to do it. If you’ve lost hope, listen to your gut, your better angels, the voices of love you’ve known over the years, and trust in Christ who is our hope, our strength, our healer. It’s all Pastoral Care 101 advice from I Peter: Don’t fear what they fear or be intimidated. The hope that is in you is stronger than all fear.