

## Run with Endurance

A sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement

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This morning's service was supposed to be about will and grace, but following the events at the Boston marathon two weeks ago, I felt I had to respond to that situation. I am taking the events in Boston more personally than I have many of the other tragedies we have seen in recent years. I suppose it is because Boston is my city. Although Bloomington Normal is my home, Boston is my city. I have spent many a Patriot's Day at the Boston Marathon. I have cheered for Team Hoyt from any number of different spots along the route from Hopkinton to Boston. One year, I had to fly to Colorado for business late on patriot's Day. Many of the runners who train in Colorado Springs were headed home on the same flight. It was a flying party until we landed and a plane full of people who had run 26 miles and then sat still for 4 hours tried to stand up. *That* was something to see.

Like most everyone, I am shocked and saddened and confused by terror interrupting life. But more, I take it as a personal affront that a day when every Bostonian and every visitor are family was rent by such meaningless violence, that the neighborhoods I know and where my friends still live, where John and I first dated and I began my ministry, were turned into neighborhoods of fear.

It seems that fear, terrorism really, has become such a part of the American landscape. We can know intellectually the uncertainty of life, but to know it and encounter it in such a close, visceral, and personal way seems almost inescapable in our world. In 1999, events at a high school in Littleton, Colorado, stunned the world. Today, school shootings have become epidemic. In 2012, there were 10 deadly school shootings that left 41 people dead and others injured. This year, in January alone, there were the same number as all of last year. Columbine, the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, Ground Zero, anthrax, the Texas Tower Sniper and the Unabomber are all immediately evocative of the terror that can suddenly rend a normal day.

Terror in our society is certainly not new, nor is its exploitation for political ends, whether to get us into a war no one wanted or to tip the balance of world power. I remember clearly being made to line the hallways of Randolph Elementary School in the duck-and-cover position as if this were part of a normal, everyday Cold War child's experience. My sister remembers safety lectures in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis telling her to hide under the dining room table in case of nuclear attack. We did not have a dining room, and so my sister spent years convinced our family would perish. That may seem like a charming and comical child's perspective on the world, but it was instilled by adults who cultivated in us an attitude and a culture of fear as a way of navigating life in a terrifying world.

This fear was instilled by well-meaning people who thought they were just keeping us safe, but fear is also spread for much less altruistic reasons. I already mentioned political gain. In 2004 John Harwood wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that the "leitmotif of the 2004 elections is fear"

as our national parties pitted a tough talking Texan against a war hero, and both sides pointed to the other as the most dangerous thing that could happen to America.

The media has been as quick to use fear to boost ratings and circulation as they once were to use sex. In an interview, David Marks, a medical reporter for NBC said, “We’re so guilty of spreading [fear]. I don’t like reporting the overhyped stories that unnecessarily scare people. But these are my assignments.” Just watch those 10 second promos that pop up during prime time to entice you to stay tuned to the nightly news. The vast majority are fear based. We all already know that if we don’t buy the right products we are doomed to drag out dull, loveless lives, but now apparently if we miss the 11:00 news one evening we are dooming our entire family to a horrific end. My favorite was the yellow plastic bath ducky accompanied by slasher movie music and a voice over that assured viewers that they did not know what dangers lurked in their children’s baths. I don’t mean to belittle the rational fear we hold in a world that is complex and uncertain. I mean only to belittle those who would exploit it for their own gain.

So how do we go about living our lives in such a world, in a world that holds both an overblown culture of fear *and* a reality where horrifying things do indeed take place? How do we find the strength to leave the house, to send our kids to school, to get in an airplane or just go to the movies when such catastrophic consequences can ensue? Ignoring reality does not serve us well and playing the odds remains uncertain. Yet, giving in to the culture of fear is an untenable way to live.

In his book *False Alarm: The Truth About the Epidemic of Fear* Marc Siegel writes, “With fear infecting and reinfecting us, our pill-happy culture looks for treatments rather than cures... Rather than ripping out this weed of fear by its roots, we attempt to neutralize it with postmodern concoctions.” He poses the question of whether there is a cure for all our fears. I don’t think there is a cure, and I don’t think a cure is even a particularly good idea because fear, like pain, gives us important clues about the world and ourselves. The goal is not to cure but to *learn* from the fear and to find ways to *cope* with the fear so that it is not running our lives. Fear is, and will always be a part of life. It is what we do with it, how we live with it and what we make of it, that is key.

President Obama, in his remarks at the interfaith service in Boston following the bombing, began by quoting the scripture passage printed in your order of service, that we must run with endurance the race that is set before us. So figuring out how we run that race, not any race, but the race is that is our race to run, the one before us, that is our task and our goal. How we go about that, I would say, is a deeply spiritual matter.

This is why I say this is a deeply spiritual matter, because in order to cope with our fears requires that we understand not only the outer situation, but our own internal response that manifests as fear. And *that* requires a journey inward. This journey of self understanding, of reaching and becoming our truest, most authentic and most divine selves is the spiritual journey.

UU minister Forrest Church wrote that religion is humanity’s response to the dual reality of being alive and knowing that we must die. The spiritual quest is what helps us reconcile that fuller picture because neither one by itself is sustaining; neither the knowledge of being alive nor

the knowledge of our mortality will suffice. Living as if we are immortal might work for awhile, but eventually the truth will out. More, living in acknowledgement of our finite existence lends a certain urgency to living fully. On the other side, living *only* in the knowledge of our mortality would be to welcome despair or futility. Living constantly in the knowledge that we and those we love will die would freeze us in our tracks. It would be insupportable. That's why terrorism is effective, because it casts us too much into the knowledge of our own mortality and the mortality of those we care for. We need the dual reality to complete the picture, to round out our existence. Our living and our dying are necessarily one.

So what do we do about the presence of fear, which is an inescapable part of that duality? How do we get to the coping part? The first step, as Neil Shister suggests in a *UU World* magazine article, is to "distinguish legitimate fears from the anxieties, worries, and dread that others try to manipulate in us." I already talked about the larger societal manipulations of politics and the media, but there are also forces closer to us that consciously or unconsciously manipulate our feelings of dread. Fear, anxiety, worry are all easily communicated, with or without words, and they are highly contagious. My friend Marisha always tells the story of how she had to put on a sweater whenever her mother was cold. Clearly the dynamic of enmeshment is the larger theme there, but that sense of worry that if you get a chill you'll catch cold and die has its roots firmly planted in fear. By making you put on a sweater I take a cutting from my own plant of fear, and offer it to you to sprout and nurture as your very own. This is just a small illustration, but clearly the fears come in much larger sizes as well. As Rebecca Parker has said "Becoming aware of the ways we have been made to feel afraid is an important step in resisting oppression." That is step one.

Step two is to realize that life, courage, fearlessness do not require of you the complete absence of fear. Indeed all those can and do contain elements of fear. Any number of thinkers have offered the idea that courage is not the opposite of fear or the absence of fear, but acting in spite of the fear. To know that we can feel the fear and act anyway is such an empowering idea. It lends a freedom of thought and action that stands in direct opposition to fear. Freedom, not courage is the opposite of fear. As Forrest Church said, "We're typically balancing competing claims of security against liberty, but ultimately you have to sacrifice safety."

The third portion of coping with fear is to face up to the impermanence of all things. As Audre Lorde wrote in this morning's responsive reading "we were never meant to survive." Not just our physical beings were meant to have an end but who we are in external appearance changes constantly – our physical appearance changes, our interests and passions change, our work, commitments, values, relationships – all that defines us as the world sees us changes. It is deep within, the sacred, holy unity of all things were we are connected in some essential way, *that* truth may be unchanging, but *we* were never meant to survive. So, to use Lorde's words, we might as well make the critical decisions, indulge the passing dreams of choice and speak. To live with a little less fear knowing that our fear is not us and that it, too, is impermanent.

The fourth suggestion I would offer for coping with fear is to know that we are not alone. There are others who care, there are others who can help show us the way out. Fear may be contagious, but as Paul Rogat Loeb wrote, "Nor should we forget that courage is contagious, that it overcomes the silence and fear that estrange people from one another." One of the most powerful

antidotes to fear is connection. There are those who are standing around the next corner holding out a cup of water and those who run toward the blast to see if they can help, and there are those who can offer us examples of how to keep running, because as FDR told us, fear paralyzes. The fuller quote is “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.” ‘Paralyzes’ is the key word there, in the portion of the quote that usually gets dropped. The reason we need to let go of the fear is because fear paralyzes. It stops us from doing what needs to be done to remedy the situation by holding us stuck where we are. Luckily, we have examples all around us of how to keep running.

One example of running the race with endurance, both literally and figuratively, I mentioned already – Team Hoyt. Rick Hoyt was born with cerebral palsy and his parents were encouraged to institutionalize him by doctors who said he would never be able to communicate or have a “normal” life. The Hoyts persisted, however, in finding the right treatment for their son, and today Rick not only holds a degree from Boston University but has worked designing systems to help people with disabilities. Rick has used a wheelchair his whole life and communicates using a computer. Every year, Dick Hoyt, Rick’s father and the other half of Team Hoyt, runs the Boston marathon pushing Rick’s wheelchair because when they run Rick feels free, like he has no disability. Dick Hoyt is 73 years old and this year was the 30<sup>th</sup> Boston Marathon that Team Hoyt ran. I’m sure this family has known a great deal of fear, and after the events of April 15<sup>th</sup> Dick’s comment was that we couldn’t let something like this stop us. It’s the same thing FDR meant – we can’t let the fear paralyze us.

Finally, I think our most powerful ally in living with fear is to act from love rather than from the fear. The Indian mystic Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, known also as Osho, put it this way: “Don’t allow the fear to overpower you, allow love to overpower you. Love comes from the center, fear always comes from the periphery; don’t allow this periphery to be dominant.” Part of this is to recognize and empathize with other’s fears. To be aware of the ways, large and small, we communicate and spread our own fear and our love. The terror that Boston experienced on April 15<sup>th</sup> occurs each and every day in some countries. We need to ask what part we might play in making that happen, in allowing that to happen or in stopping that from happening. If we prize a life of security and freedom from terror for ourselves, surely we want that for all people. What will be our role in spreading fearlessness rather than fear? It requires that we act with a spirit of power and love rather than a spirit of timidity and fear.

We are not served by having spirit of timidity, but by having a spirit of power. We are not served by a spirit of fear, but always by a spirit of love. Power and love together, for as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.” Let us go forth with a spirit of power and of love.

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.

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