Sunday, August 5, 1984
HOW TO DEAL WITH FEAR (NO. 2 IN A SERIES: HOW TO DEAL WITH FEAR)
Matthew 16:24-26, 25:14-29

Fear is a universal condition. Last week in the first sermon on this subject, I noted that some fears are harmful; others are helpful. Also, there are some things for which we should have a healthy fear — guns, for example.

I also noted last week that all fear is the fear of loss. We fear old age because we fear the loss of youth. The fear of disapproval is the fear of the loss of being approved. In the parable of the talents which Jesus told and which was read as part of the scripture reading this morning, the individual who was given only one talent was so afraid of loss that, instead of investing the money, he went and hid it in the ground.

Thus, the individuals who have not learned how to deal with fear spend most of their lives trying to avoid loss, and it becomes a very negative kind of living.

As I mentioned, one of the people in the parable of the talents was so afraid of loss that he hid the talent in the ground. Other people who are afraid try different methods of avoiding loss. They figure, “If I can’t win, how can I avoid losing?” Just like the man in the parable. Let’s look, then, at some of the other ineffective ways we try to avoid loss as a means of being able to better deal with our fears. Incidentally, I am not saying there aren’t times in life when it’s appropriate to be concerned with the avoidance of loss. For example, having insurance on one’s home and automobile to avoid loss is quite sensible. But when the entire focus of our living becomes the avoidance of loss, then life for us is no longer good or any fun. We become negative, stingy people. We no longer are open to adventure and risk.

One way in which people try to avoid loss is by not taking part. It’s the solution of “Don’t play.” Stay out of the game. If you’re not part of the game, but only on the sidelines, then of course you can’t lose, but neither can you win.

Once the main theme of our life is “Don’t play,” we are on our way to death. The final and permanent version of this solutions is, of course, suicide. Some individuals commit suicide in order to survive, or to keep from losing.

Another solution for avoiding loss is called, “Quite the game before it’s over.” Some of us can remember back in our childhood when we would quit playing. Although we were called “quitters,” that was somehow less painful than being a loser. As long as we quite the game before it was over, we could comfort ourselves with the fact that we might have won, had we stayed in the game.

The problem with always avoiding loss is that we often times learn the best lessons from losing. Failure can be a better teacher than success if we let it. But often times people quite situations too early to have learned the lessons that were there for them to learn. This frequently happens in marriage, as well as in other relationships. Again, our fear of losing causes us to quit — even though in quitting we also lose, but without learning from it.

One writer put it this way: we need to think of life as an art form — as a movement from one lesson to another to another — until we gain mastery. But the idea of mastery doesn’t exist as a possibility in most people’s minds; what exists instead is the preoccupation with the

avoidance of loss. To turn that around, we have to begin to talk about life in terms of mastery and see each life situation as a lesson. We must always be asking, “What is the lesson? What did I learn today?”

The athletes who are competing these two weeks in the Olympics are an excellent example of this. Those who are winning the medals had many losses in the past. If they had quit to avoid these losses, not only would they not have learned any lessons, but they also would not be in the Olympics at all. We can be sure that anyone who wins consistently has also learned how to deal with fear and therefore how to deal with loss.

All of life is a matter of losses and gains, losing and winning. No one bats one thousand.

Life becomes exciting when we are willing to step to the other side of fear and when we therefore no longer quit too early; when we no longer quit doing something the moment it becomes the least bit uncomfortable, frightening, or confusing.

Do not misunderstand me. There are times when we need to let go of something, cut losses, and move on — but there are also other times when we need to hang on just a little longer until we have learned what there is to be learned. If we quit only because we are uncomfortable or because we are afraid of losing, then we may be quitting for the wrong reason. Then we have let fear be the controlling factor.

Another kind of quitting which we sometimes do in order to save face is to make everyone quit at the same time, and we do this by destroying the game. The classic version of this most of learned when we were children playing a game like Monopoly. We were losing, so as we got up to go to the kitchen to get a drink or somewhere else, we just happened to knock the Monopoly board off the table onto the floor, or we upset the game in some other accidental way. We figured that if we can’t win, no one can.

Adults do the same thing, of course. A man who was flying in an airplane described what he had seen. Sitting across the aisle from him was a couple, and they were playing backgammon. As the plane began to cross the Rocky Mountains, the woman was seated next to the window, and there was fresh snow, so she turned to look out the window. Suddenly there was a little bit of turbulence — not a lot. But the observer of the game noticed that the man used his knee to upset the backgammon game. The woman looked back at him, and he said, “An air pocket.” Suddenly the man noticed the person watching them across the aisle, and he got a little embarrassed, because he knew that he had been observed upsetting the game. He figured if he couldn’t win, no one was going to win.

Sometimes we’ll do almost anything to avoid losing, so great is our fear of loss of any kind.

Or, instead of destroying the game, some people try to keep it going forever, because until the game is over, they figure they haven’t really lost. It’s another version of, “If I can’t win, no one else is going to win, either.”

I came across this example in a book I’m reading. A marriage counselor was describing a couple who had come to her for counseling. They were in their early 50s and had been married for 30 years, and it had been a miserable 30 years.

One day the counselor asked the husband, “do you have any sense of love for your wife?” He said, “No.” Then she asked, “Could you imagine that you could ever have any happiness with

each other?" he said, "No. We haven't had any happiness for so many years, I can't imagine that I could ever be happy. Besides, marriage and life are supposed to be hard."

She then asked, "Are you even interested in trying?" "No," he answered. Finally, the counselor asked, "Why don't you get a divorce and let each other go?" And he replied, "I'm not going to let her go!" "Why not?" And he answered, "After all I put up with, do you think I'm going to let her go free and have her be happy with someone else while I'm left miserable by myself?"

In talking with the wife, the counselor found that she had similar feelings. It was as if they deserve each other. Their model was that if either of them were free and found happiness, then the other would thereby have lost. Neither of them could conceive of finding happiness themselves. They are just preoccupied with the fear that the other might, which would have them as the loser. Some people will play the same absurd game with each other for a lifetime.

Perhaps you've noticed that there is a part of us that experiences a sense of loss when we hear that somebody else had a wonderful thing happen to them. How many times, when you hear somebody else's wonderful news, have you had the feeling, "Why not me?"

We forget that someone else's success or happiness does not take any success or happiness from us. It's as if we believe there is only so much happiness or joy or love available in the universe, and that if someone gets some, there won't be enough left for us. It's the fear of loss that sometimes controls us.

But there is no shortage or scarcity of goodness or love or happiness in God's creation. There's more than enough for everyone, and the more we give, the more we will receive. Our Christian faith reminds us that we need not be afraid of loss. Thus, the only way to deal with fear is to come to terms with the fact of loss. We need to remind ourselves that every time someone else wins, it does not necessarily mean that we lost.

This means that for many of us a change is necessary in the way we see things; a change in our basic beliefs or assumptions is needed if we are to effectively deal with our fears.

For some people, their belief system holds that the fearful past will extend into a fearful future, and thus it is their memory of fear and pain that makes them so vulnerable.

There are those who are raised in the kind of environment where a fearful attitude always seems to prevail — where life is lived on the assumption that the past is awful, the present is horrendous, and the future is going to be worse. This is what they believe and expect — no wonder that they are filled with fear!

Once a person believes this, then all events are seen and interpreted to fit those assumptions.

If we are willing, it is possible to change our belief system, our basic assumptions. To do so, we have to take a fresh look at every one of our cherished assumptions and values from the past. This means letting go of any investment in holding on to fear, anger, guilt, or pain. It means letting the past slip away, and with it all fears from the past that we keep extending into the future.

But how do we do this? Here's one suggestion that comes from Dr. Gerald Jampolsky, which is a restatement of one of the basic teachings of Jesus. Jampolsky puts it this way, "Have you ever given yourself the opportunity of going through just one day concentrating on totally

accepting everyone and making no judgments? Most of us think we would find that a very difficult task, since it is a rare occurrence to spend a few moments, let alone a whole day, with someone without making a judgment. When we think about it, many of us will be appalled at how often we condemn others and ourselves. We may even feel that it is almost impossible to stop being judgmental. However, all that is really necessary is our willingness to begin practicing being non-judgmental without expecting instant perfection."

It can be done. It needs to be done. Most of us have a condition which could be called "tunnel vision." We do not see people as a whole. We see just a fragment of a person, and our mind often interprets what we see as fault. Most of us we brought up in a home and school environment where emphasis was placed on constructive criticism, which actually is usually a disguise for faultfinding.

The problem is that it can and does become a habit with us, a habit which results at worst in fear and at best in conditional love. To experience unconditional love, we must get rid of the evaluator part of ourselves. In place of the evaluator, we need to hear our strong inner voice saying to ourselves and others, "I totally love and accept you as you are." As Jesus pointed out, that's the way God loves and accepts us.

Not judging others is one way of letting go of fear and experiencing love. When we learn not to judge others — and totally accept them, and not want to change them — — we can simultaneously learn to accept and love ourselves. To do it otherwise has a boomerang effect. When we send out judgments in the form of fury or other attack thoughts, they come back to us. When we refrain from making judgment and send out only love, love comes back to us.

So, here's one simple suggestion for beginning to deal with you fear. Today, allow yourself to have the single goal of inner peace by putting all your attention on the following thoughts: today I will view without judgment everything that occurs. All events provide me with another opportunity to experience love in place of fear. Amen.