

“One Generous Act” / John 6:1-15 / 29 July 2012

What are you most afraid of? Think about that question. What scares you more than anything else in all the world? Each one of us is walking around through life with a private little bundle of fears, and we carry them with us wherever we go. We take that fear-filled burden into our relationships and our jobs. We dwell on them in our waking hours and even in our sleep. What are your fears? Some people have reasonable fears, like the fear of contracting a physical disability, or the fear of getting dementia. There's the fear of being alone and the fear of ecological disaster. Other people have less rational fears, fears that don't make sense except to the person who's experiencing them. The writer Edgar Allen Poe had a crazy fear of being buried alive, of waking up inside his coffin. And there's the fear of crowds, and the fear of riding in vehicles, and the fear of domestic cats...and the fear of Jaws the shark. Now, I've told you before that my rational fear was public speaking, but my irrational fear was murky water. I used to have nightmares about murky water. I think that's why the Jaws movies scared me as a child; they tapped into something primal that I'd already been thinking about.

Well, let me tell you how it all went down. Years ago, a timeshare company in Florida called Michelle and gave her an offer she just could not refuse. In exchange for sitting through one of their sales pitches, they promised to give our whole family several free nights at an Orlando resort, plus tickets to the theme park of our choice: Disney, Epcot Center, MGM, or Universal Studios...home of Jaws the shark. We've vacationed this way before: all the driving, and the crowds, and the Florida heat. I'd rather spend a week in Vermont. And it's not just because I don't want to see Jaws! You might think there are no sharks in New England's only landlocked state, but for me, there's not a body of water in the world where that shark does not lurk. His teeth have scratched at my toes in the ponds of Pennsylvania since the 1970s. A submerged tree branch, a rock, a patch of duckweed; it all feels like shark teeth to me. Why go to Orlando?

And yet, it had been thirty years since I'd seen one of those Jaws movies. A lot can change in three decades. And since I would soon enough be forty years old, I decided that it was time to confront the movie monster from my childhood. And so, while in Orlando, I decided to go to Universal Studios to meet the old shark face to face. (Michelle was in favor, mostly because she thought it would be really fun to watch.) When we got in line for the Jaws boat ride, they told us the wait would be 45 minutes, and yes, it was a fine ride for kids. I was glad for a little time to prepare myself. On TV screens overhead, they played footage from the old films; I forced myself to look. And as I watched those decades-old scenes that had terrified me so long ago, I thought to myself, “This...is hokey.” I expected to be frightened like before, but the monster shark looked like a rubber bath toy. The lines from the movie were silly. “We're going to need a bigger boat.” The film was grainy. It wasn't frightening in the slightest.

But those 45 minutes passed quickly. Before I knew it, we were boarding the boat, all four of us. And the whole ride was just silly. There was a fin, and a splash; the boat rocked. Finally, a huge phony-looking shark came up out of the water, right up to the side of the boat. It looked like a concrete whale that I remember from the Pittsburgh Zoo, years ago, one that had an aquarium inside its gaping mouth. As we got off the ride, I marveled at how I had allowed this symbolic creature to haunt me for so many years, how ridiculous the whole thing was, how empty the old, old fear. I marveled, too, at how horrified my daughter Chloe was. Easily the worst move of my parenting career!

I had freed myself, but passed my old fear along to her. The moral of that story *could* be: If you're going to wrestle with thirty-year-old demons, do not take your four-year-old along for the ride. I think a better moral is this: The thing you fear might be real—or it might not be real—but the thing you fear cannot hurt you nearly as badly as the fear itself. The thing you fear, whether real or imagined, plausible or implausible, has little power to really harm you. But the fear of it just might kill you. Fear can stalk you for decades and decades. The thing you fear might be real, but the fear that you surround it with, that is *your own* contribution to its power. The fear of death is far greater than the sting of it. Illness, loss, solitude, poverty, rejection; the fear of these things is so much worse than the harm that they can do. And Christ invites us to lives beyond fear.

Think about our reading today from the Gospel of John. Of all Jesus' miracles, this one—the feeding of the five thousand—is the only miracle to be found in all four gospels. What was a little boy doing on a mountainside above a lake with five loaves of barley bread? Most of us modern folks wouldn't stomach a single slice of barley bread, much less five loaves of it. And what was the boy doing up there with two fishes, on the mountainside above the lake, fishes that were probably smoked for preservation or else salted? Shriveled little fishes with sharp bones. He's probably a shepherd child camped out on the hillside, tending a rich man's fields or flocks, carrying all his food with him for a few days at a time. His loaves and fishes aren't for sale; they're his own supply. His mother back in the village surely bundled them into his knapsack, hoping they'd be enough for his lonely duty out on the hills above the lake. Wouldn't she be mad to see him handing them over to feed a crowd of five thousand! Wouldn't she be worried if she knew what he was doing, giving away his food! You can imagine what she might say. "We're not rich people. We can't be responsible for a crowd of five thousand strangers. If they want to go trekking into the mountains above the lake, let them bring picnic baskets! We work hard for what little we get. We have to hold onto our own, protect what's ours. There's just not enough!"

Oh, the fear in that hypothetical mother's voice! Hers is the fear of starvation. But how different is her fear from yours? A health issue, a financial concern, being left all alone. Perhaps yours is one of those symbolic fears, like a fear of sharks—a fear that really has more to do with powerlessness than with literal sharks. How different is your fear from the fear of that theoretical mother? Her fear screams the exact same things that yours does: "Protect yourself. Preserve yourself. Assume the defensive posture." Deep down, all our fears come from pretty much the same place: an inability to trust. Whether it's the fear of starving or the fear of imaginary sharks, our fears come from a deeply held belief that we are on our own, that there's no one looking out for us but us, that it's up to us to provide, and protect, and plan, and survive.

And yet, all it took was one child's act of generosity to dispel the fear. What can happen in your life when you refuse to obey your fears, with their constant demands, when you refuse to spend your life in a posture of self-preservation and protection? Out of one generous act, five thousand were fed. In a world where everyone is scared of not having enough, to be generous is an act of trust. And what is faith but trust? Christ calls us to lives beyond the domain of fear; he calls us to lives of trust.

This story about the feeding of the five thousand reminds me of "Stone Soup," a folk tale that came out of the Napoleonic wars. Three soldiers were traveling home to France, passing through some foreign land, Russia or Poland. They were carrying

nothing with them but a huge pot. The soldiers arrived in a certain village and asked for food, but everyone protested that they were on the point of starvation. The wars had raged long and hard. There was nothing to eat for miles around. And so the soldiers set the pot to boil in the town square and told everyone they were making stone soup. They dropped a stone into the pot, and promised that it would be delicious, and everyone in the village could eat as much as they wished. “Ah, but if we only had just a pinch of salt.” And so one villager decided, well, I can spare just a little salt. “Ah, perfect, perfect. Now it’s going to be so good. You’ll see! But I remember a pot of stone soup once that was made with just a hint of pepper. If we only had some pepper.” And so another villager volunteered some pepper. “Superb! If we had an onion, this soup would be fit for a king.” A fellow says, “Well, sirs, I might just have a small onion in the cupboard.” And so it went until everyone in the village gave just a little bit of something for the soup: a turnip, a parsnip, a carrot, some meat, and they ended up with a big pot of stew, enough to feed everyone in the village for several days.

Their fears told them to hold onto the little they had. There’s not enough for everyone. But when they moved beyond fear to offer their own small part to the big pot, there was more than enough for everyone. This selfish old fear grips individuals, and churches, and whole nations! This ingrown fear prompts us to adopt defensive postures, fetal positions. But you know, you’ll drown if you go fetal in the water. Trust, not fear, is the way forward. But what—or whom—do we trust? Trust is a learned response that we can cultivate in ourselves by dwelling on our life’s moments of well-being. Trust comes from rooting around the inner chambers of our soul and chancing across something, or Someone, infinitely bigger and kinder than we are inclined to be. I’m not necessarily referring to the trust that everything will go as you hoped, nor the trust that God will make everything go smoothly and painlessly—but the simple trust that whatever happens, all will be well.

Julian of Norwich said it all the way back in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Jesus supposedly came to her in a night vision during the 100 Years War, and he whispered these words: “All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.” In an age of endless war—what could be more fearful?—during the epidemics of the Black Death, these were the words that she clung to. These were the words she shared with the world around her. She spoke it to her own fearful age, but she might just as easily have spoken it to ours. Ours is a world polarized and divided. There’s probably not a person in your life whom you couldn’t offend if you simply spoke your whole mind to them. But what would it mean to put aside our commitments to pet ideologies just long enough to throw our own little bit of zucchini or parsnip into the pot? What would it look like to overcome our fears by investing our lives outwardly, into the greater good of the world around us? It’s the inward focus that keeps us scared, but when we set our sights outside ourselves, our fear drives us into the arms of mission. Whisper these words into your own fears: “All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.”

When the General Assembly of the denomination met here in Pittsburgh last month, Cynthia Bolbach—the Moderator of the last General Assembly—preached at the opening service of worship. Chemotherapy had caused her to lose her hair since the last time we saw her, two years ago. And she was now confined to a wheelchair. As she closed the service of worship with a benediction, you could detect just the slightest quiver in her voice as she read the words: “Eternal God, you call us to ventures of which we

cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us, and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord.” These are standard words. You can hear them all over “Presbyteria.” But I had to ask myself, what do these words mean to her now that they never meant to her before? Courage! Hope! Strength!

One generous act is all it takes. What are you most afraid of? Some fears are rational and some are fantastical. Some fears are realized, and many come to nothing. But the fear itself is almost always worse than the thing we fear. And Christ calls us forward into a life—a world!—beyond fear. Amen.