

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
FEAR: THE BARRIER TO GREATER FAITH
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
July 5, 2009
Mark 6:1-13
10:00 A.M. Service**

At first blush, you might think that the townspeople in today's gospel story had taken leave of their senses. Jesus returns home only to find that they have rejected him. They recognize the wisdom of Jesus' words. They credit the miraculous nature of his deeds. He has grown; they have not. If you haven't been home in a long time, the places where you grew up can gradually grow unfamiliar to you as the years pass. Jesus returns home, to the rural town and countryside of Nazareth; not as the child who left, but as an adult. After many successful activities "*calming the sea, casting out demons, curing illnesses and raising a child from death*", he discovers that his own family, relatives and kinsfolk do not welcome him.

Then they reject him, they refuse to believe! How very contradictory: they have the evidence before them but they do not act on it.

What explains this startling turn of events? Listen again to the townspeople's complaint: "*Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary, a brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters our neighbors here?*" They are arguing for the familiar, the known, and the comfortable. And Jesus was strange and unknown; he was making them uncomfortable. In others words, they were afraid. That is why they could not believe, because fear cast out faith.

If you ask people why they do not have much faith in God, most will probably say it is because they have doubts. They are not sure God pays any attention to us. Or they do not think it is believable that Jesus could rise

from the dead. Or that the son of man is coming again, as the gospels proclaim. They would say that they do not have faith but they do have doubts.

The main obstacle to greater faith is not doubt but fear. If we do not believe more in God, it is because we are afraid to. So what are we afraid of in our faith lives, in our relationship with God? I would like to suggest three things.

First, we are afraid of understanding invisible realities. We do not want to be convinced that the moments we spend with a lonely person are more important in God's eyes than the hours we spend at our jobs. We do not want to be shown how insignificant our house and possessions are in comparison to our relationship with God and others. We know we should believe that but we really do not want to be convinced of it because that profoundly changes our lives.

Second, we are afraid of eternity. It is almost too much to absorb, the reality that we will exist forever, aware of our faults and blessings, able still to know how we lived our mortal days, aware of the joy or offense we gave to others and to God. And so we retreat back in our thinking to June 2009. We are not too willing to think more than a couple of months in the past or future because it gets too complicated. Thinking beyond our death to eternal life seems impossible. So we look away from Jesus and keep our eyes on the cluttered space of our daily lives.

Third, we are afraid of love. We all like affection, of course. It is fun to have people pay friendly attention to us. But real love demands that we face the reality of Jesus' death on the cross for us, out of love. We have to gear our relations to others after that model of love. It becomes too overwhelming, so we retreat from love to affection or kindness or goodwill—easier ways of being good to others.

The reason that we have such fear of faith is that we forget faith is not a burden. God did not send his son to make us feel bad about our lives. He came to give us the kingdom.

God has the instruction manual to our lives. After all, he made us. He knows how we are supposed to work. And he made us to be happy, fearless and fulfilled. If we lack faith or are unhappy, it is simply that we are pushing the wrong buttons in our lives. Faith is nothing more than the power supply on which we are meant to run. Living by any other standard is like trying to put outdated gasoline in a new car. We are not designed to run without faith in God's love, seeing the world through his eyes, aware of his eternal plan for us.

The real test of Christian commitment is not how we treat those who are for us, but how we relate to those who oppose us. Jesus appears to have been the first person in history to teach: ***“Love your enemies.”*** The discipline of relating to enemies in love is both morally right and the best way to convert enemies into friends.

It is important what happens to you. It is infinitely more important what happens to what happens to you. Confusing you say? So often, we have no control whatsoever over what happens to us. We have more control over how we react or respond to what happens to us. We can meet hostility with hostility and intensify a bad situation, or we can seek to diffuse the situation with patience and kindness. Jesus chose to do the latter. And so should we. Let your faith guide you beyond the barrier of fear. Come, **“Grow your spirit with us!”** I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.