

## **Fear Not**

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Roosevelt made one of the most memorable statements of his era when he said that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. He was speaking at a time when the country had been hesitant to go to war and now needed no small amount of courage to face the enemies of Germany and Japan. More recent events have evoked the same kind of call for courage. But there is another reason for fearing fear, and that is its ability to corrupt morality.

One of the courses I teach at the University of Montana is called “Religious Ethics and Modern Moral Problems.” While grading papers recently, I was struck by the degree to which students mentioned fear in relation to the moral divisions our country faces. Students wrote of fear in relation to gay marriage, responding to terrorism, and the conduct of the presidential campaign. They seem to have sensed the degree to which good ethics can be hindered by fear—fear of those who are different, who have different religions, and who have different political views.

Their papers prompted me to explore an interesting correlation. People who voted for President Bush cited terrorism and moral values as their most important issues. Maybe these aren’t really two completely separate issues, but expressions of the same emotion: fear. That terrorism should inspire fear is natural. But consider this. The states most concerned about moral values—issues like marriage and family—are the ones where fears about a decline in such moral values are most obvious. The divorce rate in the so-called southern Bible Belt states is roughly 50 percent above the national average. By contrast, the state with the lowest divorce rate is none other than Massachusetts, home to Kennedy and Kerry. The rate of teen pregnancy in Texas is more than twice as high as in Massachusetts. Homicide rates are also generally higher in the so-called red states than in the blue states.

One must be careful in drawing conclusions about such correlations, of course. But I began to wonder whether the responses to those moral values problems were also driven in part by fear. Those responses include calls for bans on gay marriage, instead of equal rights; programs of abstinence, instead of sex education; and capital punishment instead of rehabilitation. But are such responses the best we can do ethically?

Fear is a natural response to threats and uncertainty. As creatures of the natural world, we are given instincts to respond to fear with fight or flight. But as human beings, uniquely endowed with reason and moral responsibility, we are obligated to respond to fear in ways that still reflect moral judgment and compassion. In war, that means that even if we fight, we do so according the moral rules of warfare. It means treating others as we would want to be treated, rather than discriminating against people just because they are different. It means encouraging individual responsibility, rather than denying reality.

Unfortunately, fear is becoming a defining feature of *our* era. Television shows now teach us to be afraid of nearly everything. Michael Glassner describes in his book, *The Culture of Fear*, how marketers have learned to use fear to make large profits.

Politicians and others in power are using fear effectively too. In the presidential campaign, for example, Vice President Cheney, suggested that a Kerry victory would make a terrorist attack more likely. Kerry, for his part, made the extraordinary statement that he would keep us safe, as if his election would make all our vulnerabilities to terrorism suddenly disappear.

In such a culture, a central reason to fear fear itself is the powerful way it may lead us astray. That includes not only bad politics, but also embracing policies that degrade human community rather than build it—ironically, all in the name of “moral values.”

We are now in a holiday season for Christianity and Judaism. It is worth noting that the most common phrase in the Bible is “fear not.” In fact, it is the opening statement in the announcement of the birth of Jesus to lowly shepherds in the field. It is an affirmation that we will not see the truth if our fears get in the way.

Roosevelt was right that fear can paralyze us in the face of evil. But that is only half the story. Fear can also motivate people to participate in evil. Resisting *that* is where our most important battles should be fought.

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