

Homily for Mass of the Holy Spirit
Fordham Prep
September 11, 2018

The most repeated phrase in all of Scripture is “Do Not Be Afraid” or “Have no fear!” St. Ignatius Loyola defines the Evil Spirit, in part, as one who brings fear and confusion. And of course, who can forget FDR’s memorable opening in his first inaugural address in 1933, while the nation was gripped by the terror of the Great Depression, and the specter of world war:

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself!”

Fear is indeed a powerful emotion, and a powerful reality. And there are few more fearful scenes or settings than the one into which we enter in today’s reading from the Gospel of John as the disciples huddle together in a locked room.

They are afraid for three reasons:

First, they are afraid of failure: You see Jesus, their Messiah; their rabbi and friend; the One they thought had come to rescue them from sin and death; from

oppression and want; the One who had taught them about the power of love and forgiveness; the One who had given them a new understanding of themselves and God; the One who had promised a kingdom of peace and justice—this Jesus has been executed at the hands of evil men who were threatened by the very love that Jesus came to bring. The disciples are afraid: They are afraid that Jesus's message and kingdom has ended in failure.

They question why they ever thought it was a good idea to follow him in the first place.

Second, they are afraid of being alone. Jesus brought them together. He created a sense of community. He was their friend. He loved them, and they loved him. And now he is gone, and his absence creates a deep sense of loss—a feeling each of us has known when we lose a friend or loved one.

Third, and finally, they are afraid of violence. If the authorities hated Jesus; if they hunted him down; weren't they next? Indeed the disciples are literally fear for their very lives.

What are you afraid of? I know- it sounds like an alarming question; and it's a personal one. Most of us, most often, do not like to admit we are afraid of anything. We are especially discouraged to do so as men. But as sure as we are human, fears, anxiety, stress lurk beneath the surface of our hearts. So what are you afraid of? We may not find ourselves in the same extreme situation as the disciples in that locked room, but our fears follow roughly the same formula.

First, I am afraid to fail. Will I succeed in this new school year? Maybe I've enrolled in a class that will stretch my skills, and I wonder if I can make the grade. Maybe I'm taking the ACT, and I've never done that well on standardized tests. Maybe I'm going to try out for a new sport, and I'm afraid I won't make the cut. Maybe I want to win the spot of a lead role in the fall musical or the spring production, and I'm anxious about my chances. Or maybe I feel the pressure to get into a good college or university. Fear of failure is a powerful force.

Second, there's Fear of Being Alone. Will I make friends in this new school? Will I be accepted by others? Do I belong to this community, or will I find a sense of community in the university in which I enroll next year?

And third, there's Fear of Violence. Of course, there's physical violence. Thank God most of us do not face this. But people who live in war zones and even in parts of cities here in our country experience fear of violence. So do people who are physically abused.

More common for us is emotional violence—we are afraid of being hurt. We are afraid conflict in our homes. Maybe our parents fight, and we're afraid they will split up. Maybe we have relationships which are in need of repair. Maybe our father is not present in our lives, or we are at odds with our mom. It is into this experience of fear that the Risen Christ appears and breaks through the wall of the upper room, and beyond the barriers of our fearful hearts, with a message; a gift and invitation: The message?

The Risen Christ greets his fearful disciples and tells them:

“Peace be with you.”

This is “peace” in the biblical sense—Shalom. It’s not merely the absence of violence; it is presence: it is, as the song teaches us, a “blessed assurance” that Jesus is “Emmanuel”—God-With-Us. The Risen Christ also brings a powerful gift: he breathes on them and imparts to them the Holy Spirit: a force through which we recognize each other as our companions on the journey; as friends and brothers.

And, finally, the Risen Christ issues to his disciples an invitation: “Become agents of forgiveness and reconciliation.” “Those whose sins you forgive will be forgiven.” “Take the perfect mercy and love you receive from me, and share it.”

Jesus does not promise his believers that they will never be afraid. But he does promise them the power to overcome their fears: to understand God’s peace; to know the power of the Holy Spirit; and to forgive sins.

As we celebrate the Mass of the Holy Spirit, this is the good news for us:

We need not fear failure, for Jesus has given us peace. We need not fear being alone, for Jesus has given us the Holy Spirit. And we need not fear violence, for Jesus has given us reconciliation. May you claim these gifts—may you know them

deep in your heart, and so live as you are called—as “Men for Others,” dedicated to God’s greater glory.