

# “The Spirit of Fear and the Spirit of Love”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

May 20, 2007

**Text: “For the Lord did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline” (II Timothy 1:7).**

Several weeks ago, our whole nation was in shock when a student at Virginia Tech went on a shooting spree and killed thirty-one people, including himself. In the aftermath of this horrible event there has been a lot of soul searching as we have tried to understand how this type of thing could possibly happen and how it can be avoided in the future. Obviously, the killer was a terribly troubled soul with a history of mental illness. There were plenty of signs that this student was violent and both students and faculty who knew him worried about the possibility that he could be both a danger to himself and those around him.

Mental illness remains one of the most difficult illnesses that individuals and families have to face. To be sure, over the past decades there have been huge strides in understanding and treating depression, bipolar disorders, and schizophrenia. There has been an enormous breakthrough in the field of pharmacology and there are medicines available today that are remarkable in every respect.

And yet in spite of all of the advances that have been accomplished in the treatment of mental illness, it remains a conundrum in modern life. Often individuals who suffer from these kinds of illnesses are isolated and often the families of those who are mentally ill suffer a great stigma as well. The result is that in spite of the great progress that has been made in treating these kinds of illnesses, there is still a great lack of understanding and ignorance of the profound effect that mental health can have on individuals and families as well.

## I.

There is, however, more to this subject than the pervasive presence of mental illness. All of us are subject to the stresses of life that are present in our world. Often I find people who are

struggling to deal with the pressures of life: raising children and working at jobs, coping with illnesses, financial burdens, the loss of a job—the list goes on and on.

That is what draws me to this letter from the Apostle Paul to his young friend Timothy. Most New Testament Scholars believe that II Timothy reflects the latter part of Paul's life. He is in prison and his days are numbered. He is writing to his young friend Timothy with a word of hope and encouragement. Listen to his words: "For the Lord did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline" (II Timothy 1:7).

There is, after all, a certain sense of credibility in Paul's life. He knew stress. He had struggled with the ingratitude of individuals in the churches he had founded. In his letter to the church at Corinth he details some of the struggles he had endured: shipwrecked, stoned, beaten, imprisoned, cold, naked, and hungry. He had suffered the ravages of poverty and ill health. Even as he wrote this letter to Timothy, he knew that the sands of time were running low. Listen to his words: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith."

Many people today, faced by the enormous challenges of life, find themselves faced with what the New Testament calls "the spirit of fear"—that is to say, a strong sense of wondering if they have the necessary ability to deal with the pressures of life. Often they feel overwhelmed, anxious, and worried about the future. So when Paul speaks of a spirit of power, love and self-discipline, is there not any of us who does not long for these things?

Often in the church we speak of God's salvation as the deliverance from the power of sin and death. But the root of the word "salva" means health and wholeness. Part of the way that we experience God's grace is to experience the power, love, and self discipline to allow us to face the storms of life and to be able to navigate them in such a way that we are neither shipwrecked or drowned.

So, how does a person experience the power of love over the power of fear?

## II.

Surely, one of the ways that we experience this aspect of grace is through the recovery of the vital interior resources of the Christian faith. There is nothing more critical than this. Many people are attracted to the Christian faith through its intellectual challenge. Others are drawn to the great ethical teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. Still others find in the fellowship of the church a communion of saints that nourishes us in the joys and heartaches of life. Now all of these are important, but there is something else as well. On another occasion Paul spoke of "being strengthened in the inner self." There is nothing more critical in the living of these days than that.

Recently, Tom Friedman wrote in the *New York Times* on Walter Isaacson's new biography on Albert Einstein entitled: *Einstein: His Life and Universe*. Albert Einstein's life was a testimony to the unbreakable line between human freedom and creativity. Einstein's life in many ways was an illustration of a person who was fleeing oppression to find freedom. He ran away from the rote learning and authoritarianism of Germany as a teenager and fled to Italy and

Switzerland. Then, when Hitler came to power in Europe, Einstein fled to the United States, where he resisted both McCarthyism and Stalinism, because he believed in creativity and imagination as a way to nurture free thought.

Part of Einstein's genius was that he was able to think visually. When he saw a mathematical equation, he did not see numbers and letters; he could visualize in his mind the equation. As a 16-year-old boy he visualized what it was like to ride alongside a light wave and catch up. Because he could visualize it, he saw what the academic scientists could not see, which is that as you try to catch up with a light beam, the waves travel just as fast, but time slows down for you. Einstein's great theories—special relativity, general relativity, and quantum physics came from his capacity to use his imagination. Today, Friedman points out, if Einstein were alive and taught science the boring way we are teaching it to our children, Einstein would have ended up managing a hedge fund on Wall Street rather than winning the Nobel Prize.

That is true in the church as well. How often do we help our young people understand that having a faith in God does not hinder the human experience? It illuminates it, it encourages it, it gives us the courage and the strength to uncover new truths, to face new challenges, all in the confidence that our minds are a gift of God and that God wants us to use these gifts for the betterment of all humankind.

The church, at its best, has always understood this. Look at the great music, the great art, and the great universities that have been birthed out of the spirit of faith. "I can do all things through him who strengthens me," wrote the Apostle Paul. That is the spirit of faith.

### III.

Then, too, the New Testament tells us that God has given us not a spirit of fear, but of power, and love. Now the word "love" in the New Testament has nothing to do with sentimentalism. The word "agape" is a word that means seeking out the good in others and putting the good of others above ourselves. The gospel writers saw that kind of love in Jesus Christ. "For God so loved the world," writes the Gospel of John, "that he gave his only son." That is genuine love. That is what the Apostle Paul speaks of when he says, "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things" (I Corinthians 13: 4-7).

Recently I came across a book by Ernest Gordon entitled *To End All Wars*. It is the story of Gordon's experience as a British Army officer who was captured by the Japanese during World War II and assigned to the building of the Burma-Siam railway. Each day Gordon joined a work detail of prisoners to build a track bed through the low lying swampland. If a prisoner appeared to lag, a Japanese guard would beat him to death or decapitate him. Many more men simply dropped dead from exhaustion, malnutrition, and disease. Ultimately, 80,000 prisoners died.

For the most part, life among the prisoners was a very brutal existence. Men lived like animals and treated each other in very cruel ways. But one day an event happened among the

prisoners that Gordon later referred to as the “Miracle on the River Kwai” A Japanese guard discovered that a shovel was missing. When no one confessed to the theft, the guard screamed, “All die, all die.” and raised his rifle to fire at the first man in the line. At that instant an enlisted man stepped forward and said, “I did it.” Enraged, the guard lifted his weapon high in the air and brought the rifle butt down on the soldier’s skull, killing him. That evening, when the tools were inventoried again, the work crew discovered that a mistake had been made. There was no shovel missing.

One of the prisoners remembered the verse in the New Testament, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” From that day forward Gordon writes, the entire attitude in the camp shifted. Prisoners began to look out for one another. Bread was shared, not hoarded. When the camp was finally liberated, the prisoners treated their sadistic guards with kindness and not revenge. After the war, Gordon’s life took an unexpected turn. He enrolled in seminary and became a Presbyterian minister, ending up as the Dean of the Chapel at Princeton University.

That is the power of love, and perfect love casts out fear.

#### IV.

Then, too, Paul reminds us that God did not give us a spirit of fear but a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. One of the marks of a healthy life is the ability to discipline oneself and the discipline to find integrity in life. Harry Emerson Fosdick once observed that Christianity at its best is a radiant faith because it sees a profound meaning in life, worth living and if need be, worth dying for. Sometimes I wonder what is the worst thing that can happen to a person. Is it tragedy? No, not tragedy, that can often bring out the best in a person. The worst thing that can happen to a person is to see no purpose or meaning in life. Ennui, one writer notes, has made more gamblers than avarice, more drunkards than thirst, and perhaps as many suicides as despair. This is a problem that Christianity meets head on. It is an exciting, stimulating confidence that life has meaning because God has created us and that he has a plan for all of us.

Sigmund Freud, the great founder of modern Psychiatry was an atheist. He was haunted by an anxiety about death and the meaninglessness of life. He had a superstitious fear that he would not live past a certain year in his 50’s and even though he lived some 30 years more, he often spoke and wrote about what he called “this senseless life.” That is a long way from the Apostle Paul who, though in prison facing death, wrote, “Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I will say, ‘Rejoice.’”

There is nothing more important for the living of these days than the rediscovery of this inward power that not only forgives our sin but gives us a new life as well.

Amen!