

## Posted: Keep Out May 6, 2007

You may have heard the story about a stranger who came upon a backwoods farmer just sitting on the steps of his rundown house. The stranger, trying to start up a conversation with the man, asked him, 'How's your wheat crop coming along?'

"Didn't plant none," the farmer replied. "Really?" the stranger answered. "I thought this was good wheat country." "Nope, I didn't plant," said the farmer. "Was afraid it wouldn't rain."

"Well, then, how about your corn?" "Ain't got none of that either. Afraid of corn blight." A bit perplexed, the stranger asked, "Then tell me, What *did* you plant?" "Nothin'" was the reply. "I just played it safe."

Most of us probably don't think the farmer's tactics were very wise. Even though I'm not all that experienced when it comes to farming, even I can figure out that you have to plant something to have any kind of results at all. Sure, there are always the risks associated with weather, but that's the risk a farmer has to take in order to survive.

While most of us would agree that the farmer was operating far too much out of fear when it came to his crops, I wonder how many of us would see the ways in which we sometimes operate out of fear in our own lives? It may not be about planting corn or wheat, but my guess is that we could name plenty of times when we've played it safe when it has come to life in general, and especially when it has come to our relationships.

How often do we find ourselves holding back, being unwilling to become invested in a new friendship? How many times have we been unwilling to share of ourselves, and no more, thinking "if they really knew me, they wouldn't like me?" How many times do we busy ourselves, or hide behind work or golf, or our "to do" list to avoid close connections with those we profess to love? How many times do we use the "not enough time" excuse to protect the distances between us? We may even convince ourselves that the words of Dorothy Parker are our words. She said, "Four things I'd have been better without: love, curiosity, freckles and doubt."

My guess is that we do those things and others a lot more than we're willing to admit, and my hunch is we do that because we're afraid. We're afraid friends won't really like us, or that our flaws will be all too obvious. We play it safe rather than daring to be vulnerable with those close to us. We build all kinds of monstrous outcomes to being found out, so to protect ourselves, we back away.

The reality is that the vast majority of the things we're afraid of are totally without foundation. We've let our fears control our lives to the point that we're convinced the worst is going to happen, so we put up roadblocks. We may become defensive, and shutting friends out. We isolate ourselves, refusing to socialize with co-workers, family or friends. We do all that because we're filled with these bigger than life fears.

Mort Crim tells a story about a ritual that a Boy Scout troop engaged in. The scoutmaster would line up chairs in a pattern so that they created an obstacle course. Then, after studying the chairs and the pattern, the new scouts would be blindfolded and told to maneuver through them. As soon as the blindfolds were in place, the older scouts would quietly remove all the chairs. One former scout said it was hilarious watching those guys with the blindfolds on trying to weave their way through obstacles that weren't there.

That's a lot like how many of us are with our fears. When we take off the blinders and look at the obstacles we think are in our way, most of the time we'll find that those obstacles don't really exist.

I can't begin to tell you how many people I've talked with over the years who have had a friendship blow up on them, or a lover walk out, or someone they cherished die, and they have felt rejected or abandoned. , and probably stir some fears that we had in childhood. Many a child has been afraid that a parent will leave them to fend on their own. I certainly remember that fear from when I was a child. I suspect most of us do.

And yet, most of us also grow out of that fear. We know that things happen in the course of life, and we know that we'll face disappointment and loss. It's inevitable, and to believe otherwise is pretty foolish. And we learn, as we grow and mature, that, even though loss is painful, we can survive.

The reality is that when we allow our fears to rule, we miss out on the possibility of what's at hand right now. We've missed out on the opportunity to love and be loved. We miss out on a vital part of life—relationships with others. I really think the words of Alfred Lord Tennyson are right on the money. You may remember that he said, "It's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." I'm sure he wrote those words because he understood that connections with others are at the very center of what life is all about; relationships make life meaningful.

That isn't the way God wants things to be. The ancient promise God made to us was, "I'll be your God; you be my people." The only way we

have connection with God is through opening ourselves up, and being willing to let God come in, and to let God's total and complete love for each one of us permeate to the very core of our being.

You see, even when we think we're totally unlovable and unacceptable, God doesn't think so. God loves us all the time, just as we are, and God is always with us. My prayer always is that the depth of God's love will become real for each of us, and we'll know that we are someone—we are God's child, and nothing can change that. God loves us.

That's precisely what our Bible passage for today is saying to us. It reads like this: **“God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us...There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life is one not yet fully formed in love.”**

If I understand what this passage is trying to say, and I think I do, it's stating with great clarity that love begins and ends with God. God is love, and God loves each and every one of us. In God's eyes, we are all lovable, and we're all capable of loving others.

One of the Bible passages I almost chose for today is actually a prayer that Paul offers for the people in Ephesus. At one point in my spiritual journey, someone suggested to me that I pray that prayer, using first person pronouns rather than second person. It's been very meaningful to me, and I'd like us to share it together this morning, in hopes that it will be meaningful for you.

From Ephesians 3:14-18...

**I ask God to give me power through the Spirit to be strong in my inner self, and I pray that Christ will make his home in my heart through faith. I pray that I may have my roots and foundation in love, so that I, together with all God's people, may have the power to understand how broad and long, how high and deep, is God's love—although it can never be fully known—and so be completely filled with the very nature of God. Amen.**

Dr. David Viscott, a psychologist and author, writes, “To love and be loved is to feel the sun from both sides.” As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we're willing to take the risk to experience the warmth of God's love and the love of others who live with us on this planet.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.