

“Fear Not: Caring Communities”
Isaiah 11:1-10

In April of 2019, StoryCorps aired a powerful story/conversation about the power of human connection and love. This one was about a woman named Ellen Hughes and a man named Keith Miller. Ellen has a thirty-three-year-old son named Walker who has autism. Keith is a Public Safety Sergeant who works in a hospital Emergency Room at Loyola University Medical Center in Chicago. They met because Walker was becoming agitated and violent and was struggling to communicate. Ellen knew from experience that he needed to get to a hospital. They were scared to death going to the ER, because they had had bad experiences there before. Once, she says, “When he was a little boy, an officer got on his back while he was screaming. And he’s been handcuffed to gurneys in emergency rooms just for having a seizure and being big.” By the time they get to the ER, he’s so agitated, Walker has bitten his mom. “The whole thing is so traumatic. I’m sitting there broken-hearted, scared out of my mind, bleeding and Walker is trying to run away. And I see, like, five guys on him and all I think is this will not end well they’re gonna kill him. But suddenly I hear this cute game.”

It is Keith Miller, playing a game with her son. Walker is trying to escape, and Keith is talking to him, making up a game, “Walker gets up! Walker sits down. Walker scoots back. Walker lies down! And then high fives all around.” Ellen looks, and Walker is beaming. And he is high fiving every single officer. “And then,” Ellen remembers, “And then you started singing and I thought I would lose it forever.” Keith says, I started singing Mr. Rogers neighborhood. “You are singing Mr. Rogers with these men,” Ellen remembers. “And he went from being terrified to feeling like he had cool friends, cool guys hanging out with him.” “Yeah,” Keith says. “Yeah. I saw this man who was dealing with something he just did not understand. And I saw the fear in your face. It touched me personally. My son is 14. He was 15 months when he was first diagnosed as being autistic. Being a father of a child who has autism, I don’t know what changes is gonna occur in him. And, as parents, we’re there to help them deal with their obstacles. And if we can’t do it by ourselves, there’s other people out there to help. And I want to be one of those other people.”

It is an incredible story of love and kindness reminding us of how human connections could become antidotes to fear. Think of this story in light of so many other stories where people act in fear instead of love and the results are tragic. The story of Daniel Prude of Rochester comes to mind as a tragic example of how fear could lead to more pain and suffering. Daniel was in a similar situation to that of Walker, but the difference was the response he got was that of fear.

Caring relationships and communities can bring our world so much hope and healing. Yet, a lot of forces of fear in our world lead us to be fearful of each other, of those who are different, of views we don’t understand, and of communities that are often scapegoated.

Our scripture for today is a vision of a world where love and compassion reign instead of fear and violence. The key to that vision is forming bonds among those who are usually separate. In this vision, we hear the prophet Isaiah proclaiming a time when the people of Israel would have a leader who would be a representation of God's will on earth and the sign of that happening will be a reality when the wolf and the lamb would live together in peace, the leopard and the goat will lie down together and even the lion would eat grass.

At first blush we may think that this is an impossible vision, a pipe dream, and certainly something that would never happen in our world today. Yet, as we consider this vision of Isaiah carefully, we see that he is not presenting it as a dream to help people cope with the pain of their daily realities. It is not something that was said to make them keep going. It is a vision that calls us to change the way we see the world and God's involvement in it. Isaiah was a court prophet in the sixth century BCE. He was heavily involved in the politics of his day. Prophets in those days were the people who spoke on behalf of God and faith in the daily affairs of the kingdom. Isaiah saw up close and personal the way kings behaved and how they manipulated the system to their advantage and to the advantage of the powerful and wealthy in the land. Isaiah knew how fear could be used to control and divide people. Yet, Isaiah was gifted with a deeper vision of reality. He did not only see the reality of the world. He saw reality through the eyes of God. He saw that God's presence permeated all of life, and that a caring community was possible. Where people saw only corruption and fear, Isaiah was able to see God's presence. Where people saw only conflict and divisions, Isaiah saw the potential for wholeness and love. Where people only saw despair and destruction, Isaiah saw God's promise for hope and peace. Where people only saw the law of the jungle, Isaiah saw the potential for harmony and peace even in the wild.

Isaiah saw a world where cooperation was the norm instead of competition. We so need this vision today, especially in the year 2020. Despite our divisions and the challenge of the pandemic, I think we are realizing that the old ways of fear and hate have not served us well. Pope Francis this past week criticized countries for not working together to handle the coronavirus crisis.

In his book, *Fear Not*, Eric Law writes this about the need for creating communities of care, "What I have learned is that using external approaches, such as rules, technologies, and rituals, to deal with our fear is often ineffective. As long as we were buying substitutes for facing our fears, such as using our tax money to wage wars, hiring people in new uniforms to check the passengers and their bags at the airports, and devising color-coded alert systems, that encourage us to be suspicious of our neighbors, we will continue to feel fear's negative effects in alienating us from ourselves, from others, and from our communities. We have to find other ways to address our fears that will bring people together in a trusting community, so that we can face our fears faithfully and work through our fears constructively." Law suggests using the terror alert color coding system as a model for deeper community engagement. When green is the color, the invitation is to get to know our neighbors. When it is blue, guarded risk, we would gather at our places of worship or community centers to be part of community groups where there is diversity of

people and opinions. When the code is yellow, elevated risk, educational institutions and workplaces should gather people in their organizations. All of this to lead up to when the code is orange or red, high and severe risk, we would rely on the networks we established to help us get through the challenge. And in all of these kinds of networks, we learn how to communicate authentically and with respect. Think of this kind of system as a help for us during this pandemic. Think of it in terms dealing with racism or political divisions.

We are going to end with a prayer of affirmation for us and for our world to bridge the gaps that fear creates among us. We will be using the image of the resurrection of Jesus as our guide. (Adapted from *Creative praying in Groups* by Julia McGuinness)

There was a time when people thought that the dead stayed lifeless, when the end of the road was the end of the road. But Jesus is risen from the dead. And so we now know that there is nothing to fear in life. Nothing is lost and gone that cannot rise into something new. Even the garbage heap can yield grains of gold.

There was a time when a closed door stayed shut, when we locked ourselves away from the fear and loss we could not face. But Jesus is risen from the dead: he came through locked doors to greet his fearful followers. So now we can walk free of fear to face new challenges and opportunities, even into the places where we've only dreamed of going. There was a time when we felt alone and separate from God and from others, when we called out in our emptiness without being sure anyone heard us. But Jesus is risen from the dead: he came to Galilee to break bread and eat it with his dear friends. So now we know his presence with us amidst human frailty, especially during this pandemic, the darkest night of our time. Jesus showed us how to break down the walls of hostility that divide us. And so we are invited to live this day as those who are reconciled to one another and who know Jesus' radical way of love, compassion, and grace. Amen.