

Fear Not Others: The Christian Response to Xenophobia

When Franklin D. Roosevelt took the stage and delivered his first inaugural address, he spoke before a nation of frightened Americans. The year was 1933. A quarter of the nation was unemployed. As he bellowed those now-famous words - "*The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.*" FDR. Roosevelt couldn't have fathomed the face of his country 84 years later. For there's no doubt that many today live in a state of fear.

We live in a culture today that is preoccupied with threats to safety, both real and perceived. And while we are prone to miscalculating risk, there's more at work here than frazzled modern nerves: **Americans are fearful. Truly fearful.** When they're asked, a majority say with certainty that the world is more dangerous than ever before. Even in the face of evidence that negates this misperception, there is no relief. We lock our doors, say our prayers, and still can't get a good night sleep.

For the first time in history, fear is tearing society apart. In the past, fear has encouraged solidarity – I am a child of the 50s, when nuclear anxieties bound Americans together. Contemporary fear throws wedges between us, which in turn, makes us ever more fearful. Media outlets, politicians, and businesses all have learned to capitalize on this distinctly modern sense of dread, and thus profit from finding ways to cultivate it. Until we find a way to resist fear, we'll live at the mercy of these emotional entrepreneurs – and in doing so, be party to the personal, cultural, political, and spiritual consequences.

TODAY, we continue our series A No Fear Year and focus in on a singular fear:

In December Dictionary.com chose *xenophobia* as its word of the year! The folks at Dictionary.com define **Xenophobia** as "1. *fear or hatred of foreigners, people from different cultures, or strangers*; 2. *fear or dislike of the customs, dress, etc., of people who are culturally different from oneself.*" Fear of others who are different.

In a statement, Dictionary.com said they choose this as the word of the year because, "*Some of the most prominent news stories this year have centered on fear of the 'other'.*" Fear of the one that is different has fueled politics this last year. Obama accused Trump as being xenophobic. Trump said that his views on refugees, immigration, Muslims and race were not xenophobic; his statements were based, in his words, on "intelligence." I am not going to continue the political debate, but say time will tell. **BUT I am as a Christian concerned when we as both a culture in general and as Christians in particular live in fear and react fearfully to those who are simply different.**

Christianity's default position, in debates about those who are perceived as different is hospitality and mercy – hospitality that is based upon God's welcoming of us, his extending mercy to us in the cross of Jesus Christ. It's fine to debate under what conditions we will admit and integrate newcomers so that they are free to thrive in North American culture. However, **let's admit that as Christians we are "prejudiced" toward hospitality and mercy, openhandedness particularly toward those in need because that's the way God in Christ has treated us and commanded us to treat others.**

Who God is and what God has done in Christ for us is the theological basis for Paul's, *"Welcome each other, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you, for God's glory."* (Romans 15:7). We actually believe that in a world of boundaries, borders and where a whole lot of folks are different than we are, Christ has mysteriously, wondrously united Jews and Gentiles showing no regard for ethnicity, gender, race or class (1 Corinthians 12:13). The God we meet in Jesus Christ is relentlessly loving, kind, full of mercy, self-giving. If we are in Christ, we are to be like him. Paul tells us, *"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."* Galatians 2:20

The radical hospitality we sinners have received in Jesus Christ is the life Jesus wants us to live. The Holy Spirit has been given to us to develop in us Christ like hospitality towards the stranger. The church was formed by God as a showcase of what God can do among ordinary folk who dare to live under the commands of Christ.

"If God has loved us in this way, we also ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear. We love because he first loved us." 1 John 4:11-12,18,20,21

The indicative: **God loved us** when we were weak and sinful, leads to the imperative: **we also ought to love** those who are weak and sinful (Romans 5:6)
God's love is made complete as it flows through us and another is touched, when people move from stranger status to brother and sister in Christ.
No fear in love, perfect love (God's love) drives out fear, knowing God keeps us from fear.

Reminder: we love because God has loved us. NOT in our strength but His. NOT because someone is worthy, but because God has loved us.

As God has had compassion on us, compassion can flow from us

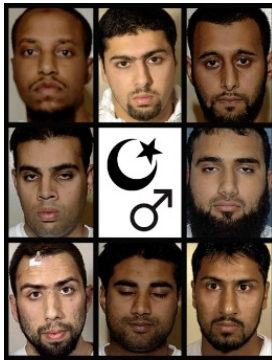
As God has forgiven us who were at enmity with him, we can forgive our enemies

Without God's grace and mercy we have little to offer.

Just how Xenophobic Are We?

I know few who are not xenophobic towards Indians, not native Americans but those who come from India. Please hear me out when I say what I am about to say; What is the difference between Americans and Indians? Their work ethic." They work. They know, there is not assistance from the state so they work.

They know they want a better life for their children so they work. And the money they get, they tend to save or invest in another small neighborhood business. And we locals get angry. "They take our jobs and we don't know them and deep down in we are afraid of them.



How many of us are comfortable sitting beside someone of Arab descent on a plane who looks like one of these know terrorists? We don't need to know anything about them but they are dark skinned. Then they begin to speak, you know a little French, some Spanish and its neither of them so who is this person beside you...? And tension begins to build, heart begins to race, palms begin to sweat.

Let's say you attended a Penguins game, you know the parking is cheaper over by Mercy Hospital. As you are walking up the stairwell you meet some gentlemen along the way... Tell me you don't hold your purse tighter and all of a sudden have your pulse increase.



How about the people you are standing in the check-out line between, one is has multiple body piercings the other has scary tattoos covering arms and going up neck and across face.



What about the pan handler (a name we give folks who are down and out) who is sitting along the street asking for a hand out? Or our response to the shabbily dressed individual who literally smells.



What is our response to those who are different?

There is a story in Luke 10:25-37 that Jesus told that fits our scenarios perfectly. It is about a man who landed in the ditch. On his way from Jerusalem to Jericho he was attacked. He was totally helpless. And a priest came by. And when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. Then a Levite, a teacher of the Mosaic Law came. When he saw the man, he also passed by on the other side.

Interestingly Jesus does not disclose the “nationality” of the man in the ditch. Was he a fellow Jew? Was he a Samaritan? Was he a Greek tradesman or a Roman soldier? We don’t know. And we don’t know, because it does not matter. **Bottom line is, there was somebody who was different. They were in a ditch, you were not.**

When somebody is in need of help, that is not the time to discuss politics or religion or consider one’s own perspective or even one’s safety. It’s not the time to ask is this man really my neighbor? Could I be endangered, if I help him?

The Samaritan who comes that way, just stops when he sees the man. We read, *“He had compassion.”* And in having “compassion” he does what the Law of God demands.

What does God’s Word say about foreigners? This question intrigues me as we all know that the ancient Israelites were a very exclusive group. They hated foreigners. They preached neighborly love, but only towards their own people. They were to separate themselves and remain holy.

As it often does the Word of God surprised me as I looked for the answer. One of the verses I read was Leviticus 19:33. God says to the Israelites: *“Do not mistreat foreigners who are living in your land.”* This sentence is repeated at least 10 times in the books Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. In fact the “foreigners” are elevated to the category of the poor and the widows who get special protection and care from God. In Leviticus we read: *“When you harvest your fields, do not cut the grain at the edges of the fields, and do not go back to cut the heads of grain that were left; leave them for poor people and foreigners”* Leviticus 23:22. And in Deuteronomy, a passage that refers to worshipping together, we read: *“Be joyful in the LORD’s presence, together with your children, your servants... orphans, widows and foreigners who live in your towns.”* Deuteronomy 16:11.

God sides with the vulnerable. And do you know why? Because he has compassion? And he says to the Israelites: *“Have you forgotten? In Egypt you were the foreigners. And therefore love the foreigner as you love yourself”* (cf Ex.23:9; Lev.19:34). Love the outsider, the one who is different.

Compassion is sometimes learned. Compassion is more often the result of experiencing compassion. The first Christians were merciful. They knew what it meant to not be wanted. They were persecuted, rejected by man but they had experienced God’s mercy.

Question: **Have you experienced mercy?** If you are in Christ the answer is “*Yes, you have!*” When you read the parable about the “Good Samaritan” you identify yourself with. It is nice to be good, to help others. But that is not what Jesus was trying to communicate to his original audience. Was he trying to say: “*You could be the priest or the Levite, or maybe the Samaritan. NO, I think he was saying: I see you as the man in the ditch*”. Maybe you haven’t realized it yet, but Jesus is the Samaritan and you are the one in need of help. He comes to you to extend to you his mercy to you. When you realize: I was the one in need of help, dirty, quite different than a holy God, sinful and God reached down and pulled me up and out and healed my brokenness...then the Kingdom of God dawns on your life and you can begin to see others differently.

When you have consciously experienced God’s mercy, you don’t ask: “*Does he/she need my help?* You help! That does not mean certain issues in our country don’t need to be addressed. Yes, we need to be vigilante about securing our borders and protecting one another from any and all forms of violence. These need to be addressed. **But, because someone is different than us we cannot be blind by our fear to their pain and their needs.** We must be open to allow God to use us as instruments of his mercy that we may grow in our faith and become more Christ-like: building bridges, building relationships, extending words of encouragement and hands of help.