

From Fear to Compassion

Fear has been part of the human experience since the beginning of time. When Adam and Eve made the decision to change their relationship with God in the Garden of Eden, fear entered in. Fear took root when they became acutely aware of their powerlessness and the uncertainty of things they could not control. That same fear lives in the hearts of humanity today.

Human beings often seem not fully aware of the power of fear in their life and the way it affects their mood, their decisions, and even their health. Evidence of the power of fear is all around us, in politics, in communities, in schools, and in relationships. Fear of our way of life changing, fear of lack of resources, fear of broken relationships, fear of people that we don't understand. Sadly for all of us, fear creates pathways for the worst of who we are. It allows evil to enter into our lives and our communities and blinds us to the common humanity that we share. Fear can lead to violence, injustice, oppression, and ultimately to death.

The words I just read are the first half of a devotional written by Andrew Hartzler, professor of accounting at Goshen College in Indiana.¹ Our Lenten theme is *Seeking God's Way*. Today's scriptures help us to remember that way of God is to respond to others with compassion rather than letting fear dictate our actions.²

The writer of Psalm 27 is seeking a safe place in times of trouble and fear. This powerful song expresses unshakable trust in God. The psalm's opening six verses convey confidence that with the LORD one need not be afraid. In the face of attack, the LORD is the refuge. There is One who is stronger than the enemy.

The psalmist expresses singleness of purpose – to be a member of God's household, to live in perpetual communion with God. The temple was loved as the place where people could meet God, ask for divine guidance, and seek answers to the difficulty facing them. This is where the psalmist longs to be.

Three pictures describe the feeling of security in the temple – shelter, tent, and rock. The psalmist responds with praise – offering sacrifices out of gratitude and telling others what the LORD has done.

Even while declaring the joy and shelter of God's sanctuary, the psalmist continues to seek a place of safety. The petitions of the next six verses beg for guidance and protection. In a prayer to God who alone is helper, the psalmist recalls the instruction to seek God's face. This is both a command and a promise.

Even so, fear persists. Four times the singer begs not to be abandoned. Don't hide your face from me. Don't push me aside. Don't neglect me. Don't leave me all alone.

The psalm ends with an appeal to hope, trust, and wait. In the end, God alone is the source of salvation and help. This invitation to trust through courageous hope in God appears to be as much for the psalm writer's benefit as it is for anyone else who will sing this song.

Psalm 27 is designed for tough times. Physical threats, verbal assaults and malicious reports have marked the history of God's people. Joseph, Moses, David, Jesus, Paul, members of the early church, and those who faced violence because of their faith have found refuge in the psalmist's words of encouragement. Use of the psalm can help us to identify our fears, remember the source of our

¹ [From fear to compassion | Advent & Lenten Devotions | Goshen College](#)

² This sermon draws from "Worship Resources, Lent-Easter 2022," Leader: Winter 2021-2022; Pulpit Fiction, [Lent 2C — Pulpit Fiction](#); and James H. Waltner, *Psalms, BCBC*, Herald Press, 2006, pp. 146-149.

strength, and take courage in the one who is our helper.

I wonder if Jesus had this psalm in mind when confronting the threat found in our gospel reading. Luke reports that Jesus is making his way from Galilee south to Jerusalem, stopping in towns and villages along the way.

As he travels, some Pharisees deliver a warning, “You’d better get out of here because Herod is plotting Your murder.”³ Herod, who had already killed John, heard about what Jesus was doing, and decided he wanted to bring Jesus in for questioning.

By the way, this incident reminds us that even though the Pharisees are often depicted in a bad light, they are not the “bad-guys.” Their desire to strictly adhere to their interpretations of the Hebrew scripture and Jewish traditions sometimes put them in opposition to what Jesus was doing, but most of them weren’t Jesus’ enemies.

Any fear this warning may have caused for Jesus doesn’t deter him from his ministry. His compassion for the people who come to him for healing and teaching overcomes any fear he might have about what will happen to him as he continues to do what God has called him to do.

Note that in his response Jesus likens himself to a hen and Herod to a fox—a dangerous relationship! And even with the risks involved, Jesus models how to go beyond fear of consequences into God’s way of compassion, working to gather in all the chicks. Jesus longed to welcome the people into his arms. He longs to hold us all in that embrace.

I began this sermon with words about fear written by Andrew Hartzler. Listen to how he finishes his devotional.

So how do we push back against the crushing weight that fear can bring? I believe that the Holy Spirit joins us in this fight when we lean into compassion for other human beings. Fear by its very nature is an inward-looking act, a concern for self over all else. There are instances where fear can be a good thing, fear of driving too fast, fear of standing too close to the edge of the cliff, fear of wounding others. For the most part though, fear is the antithesis of compassion. It ignores the other, denies the other, and oftentimes vilifies the other as being the cause of our fear.

Compassion is the opposite of fearful living. It considers the other, enters into the experience of the other, walks in the shoes of the other, desires health and happiness for the other. When we hold tightly to compassion for other human beings we are able to diminish the power of fear in our lives and live more fully into the beauty of our humanity. Compassion is rooted in the heart of who God is and who God created us to be. So let us embrace compassion as our mantra, to partner with God in the light, and call on God to strengthen us when fear rises up within.

It’s a common experience for fear to rise up as people make decisions about church life, structure, and statements of faith. At the end of May, delegates from congregations, area conferences, and racial/ethnic groups will meet in Kansas City for a special assembly of Mennonite Church USA. I’ll be the delegate from Salina Mennonite Church.

Two resolutions related to inclusion of LGBTQIA persons will be on the agenda. I’ll do my best to summarize these accurately. You can read these resolutions and watch webinars about them on the MC USA website.⁴

LGBTQIA stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual. The acronym is one generally accepted way of representing a diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities. Sometimes “queer” is used as an umbrella term for LGBTQIA. I’ll use both in this sermon.

One resolution under consideration at the delegate assembly is to retire the Membership Guidelines as the active polity in Mennonite Church USA.⁵ The Membership Guidelines⁶ were written

³ Luke 13:31, *The Voice*

⁴ [Delegate Resources: Special Session May 2022 | Mennonite Church USA \(mennoniteusa.org\)](#)

⁵ [EB-Resolution-Membership-Guidelines-2021-Approved-by-EB-April-2021.pdf \(mennoniteusa.org\)](#)

⁶ [MembershipGuidelines_2013_July.pdf \(mennoniteusa.org\)](#)

to facilitate the formation of MC USA in 2002. As two denominations tried to form a new one, a major stumbling block was the difference in the way each denomination handled congregations who allowed openly gay members and pastors' officiating same-sex marriages. The practice in one group was to put most of the decisions about membership and pastoral practice into the hands of individual congregations. In the other group, much more authority was placed in the hands of the area conferences and denominational leadership.

In order for the merger to proceed, a third article was added to the Membership Guidelines. It reads: *Pastors holding credentials in a conference of Mennonite Church USA may not perform a same-sex covenant ceremony. Such action would be grounds for review of their credentials by their area conference's ministerial credentialing body.* These guidelines were supposed to be reviewed for their ongoing usefulness in 2007, but continuing conflict over queer persons in the church prevented the process from moving forward.

In 2015, the Delegate Assembly adopted two resolutions that are in tension with one another. One resolution stated that the Membership Guidelines along with the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective would continue to be the guiding documents for questions regarding church membership and same-sex relationships and marriages.⁷ The other resolution acknowledged the differences within MC USA regarding same-sex marriage and called on all those in MC USA to offer grace, love, and forbearance toward conferences, congregations, and pastors in our body who, in different ways, seek to be faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ on matters related to same-sex covenanted unions.⁸

Since 2015, conferences, congregations, and pastors have lived into this resolution resulting in varied practices concerning same-sex marriage and the credentialing of same-sex married persons. The prohibition in the Membership Guidelines against credentialed MC USA pastors performing same-sex marriages is not an actively enforced policy in all congregations and conferences. Therefore, the resolution is to retire the Membership Guidelines as the active polity in our denomination.

The Clarification on Mennonite Church USA Polity and the Role of the Membership Guidelines of Mennonite Church USA is organizational. The resolution clarifies authority in MC USA and would align our practice with our stated polity. It doesn't change the authority within the system.⁹

A related resolution is a statement which would give direction to the church on matters of Christian faithfulness. The Resolution for Repentance and Transformation¹⁰ includes confession and commitments. The opening paragraph reads as follows: *Current policies of Mennonite Church USA do violence to LGBTQIA people by failing to affirm their full, God-given identities and by restricting their full participation in the life, ministries and rituals of the broader church. The rejection of LGBTQIA people by MC USA has silenced and denied ministry callings, torn apart families, forced parents to choose between their church and their child, and caused many LGBTQIA people to leave the church. In some cases, rejection by their faith community is a factor in LGBTQIA people self-harming or even dying by suicide.*

The resolution states that the 2001 Membership Guidelines are the basis for many of these wounds. According to this proposed statement, excluding LGBTQIA people from the church denies God's good creation. Exclusion denies the ministry of Jesus to those traditionally despised and rejected by religious institutions. And it denies the work of the Holy Spirit who empowers queer Christians to give and receive every gift in the body of Christ. Excluding queer people harms not only them and their allies, but also the full body of Christ. It rejects the spiritual gifts that God longs to share through LGBTQIA people with the Mennonite Church.

⁷ [Resolution On the Status of the Membership Guidelines - 2015 | Mennonite Church USA \(mennoniteusa.org\)](#)

⁸ [Forbearance in the Midst of Differences - 2015 | Mennonite Church USA \(mennoniteusa.org\)](#)

⁹ [For Justice Resolution \(mennoniteusa.org\)](#)

¹⁰ [A-Resolution-for-Repentance-and-Transformation-Rev-2.0.pdf \(mennoniteusa.org\)](#)

The resolution includes confession of how our denominational and congregational policies, structures, practices, and theologies have harmed LGBTQIA Mennonites and their families along with other groups within the church. It calls for the Membership Guidelines to be rescinded and actions to be taken to include queer people in anything produced that specifically affects them. It asks for consultation, representation, support, and policy change.

Unlike the resolution on retiring the Membership Guidelines which will definitely be discussed and voted on at the Delegate Assembly in May, the repentance and transformation resolution will undergo a two-step process. First, the delegates will vote or whether or not to discuss and vote on the resolution. If that vote doesn't pass, then this resolution will be removed from the agenda. If it does pass, then the delegates will discuss and vote on the contents of the resolution.

If this church statement is discussed, voted on, and approved by the delegates, it would then be implemented by the national body, area conferences, local congregations and individual followers of Jesus according to the rights and responsibilities provided to each body.¹¹ Approval of this would not dictate how congregations and conferences relate to LGBTQIA persons. Conferences and congregations could continue to include or exclude queer people and sanction or not sanction pastors who officiate at same-sex weddings. It would be similar to the ordination of women which is approved by MC USA statements but not practiced in some congregations and conferences.

I welcome your feedback on these two resolutions. Use the links included in this sermon to read the documents for yourself. We plan to schedule a meeting sometime after Easter when we can talk about these as a congregation.

I wonder how fear and compassion will interact as delegates and congregations prepare for the assembly in May. Last week I asked what we as a denomination or congregation were willing to do or not do in order to survive as an organization. There is fear that passage of these resolutions will go against God's will. There is fear that passage of these resolutions will motivate additional congregations or conferences to leave our denomination. There is fear that rejection of these resolutions will cause additional pain to LGBTQIA Mennonites. How do we move from fear to compassion? What is the compassionate action when it comes to these resolutions? What is the faithful action?

Personally, I am inclined to vote "yes" on both of these resolutions. I don't see any reason to keep the Membership Guidelines in place. It is time for them to be retired. I have some fear and hesitation about the repentance and transformation resolution. I'm uncomfortable with some of the statements it makes. But, perhaps, that makes it all the more necessary. Some of my discomfort comes from confronting the fact that my silent support of queer people has actually caused harm to them because silence from supporters allows harmful policies and practices to stay in place. Last year, after a similar resolution written by a group that included MC USA staff and members of the LGBTQIA community failed to gain the support of a larger group of church representatives and wasn't put on the agenda of the May delegate assembly, I signed the Resolution of Repentance and Transformation. This doesn't mean that I will automatically vote in favor of the resolution in May if the congregation has strong reservations about me doing so.

I think of Jesus modeling how to go beyond his fear of consequences into God's way of compassion, working to gather in all the chicks into his embrace. I think of the psalmist seeking and sharing the goodness of God, encouraging all who sing the song to wait for the LORD, be strong, and let their heart take courage. As we seek God's way, may we move from a place where fear dictates our actions to a space where our response to others is guided by compassion. Amen.

¹¹ [For Justice Resolution \(mennoniteusa.org\)](http://ForJusticeResolution(mennoniteusa.org))