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A Positive Evaluation of Fear and Guilt

Rev. Peter L. Schmidt

Rev. Schmidt, pastor of Bethel Lutheran Church in Bemidji, Minnesota, gave the following address at the 1983 meeting of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds in Mexico City.

In recent years, we have witnessed a dramatic growth in concern for our natural environment. "Ecology" is a word on everyone's mind. We are willing to fight for the snail darter and the whale, the bald eagle and ferret, for we believe that each part of God's creation is important, and has its rightful place in the great scheme of things. We are also aware of the delicate *balance of nature* which is upset when a single species is lost to extinction, and how such a loss is to everyone's detriment.

Today it is important to realize that the same concern for ecology in the natural world should direct our care of the psyche. At the present time, there are forces operating which seek the extinction of some of our authentic emotions. "Fear" and "guilt" are on the endangered species list. They are being hunted down and shot at with increasing frequency by medical and mental health professionals and counselors of various persuasions, including the clergy. *I am not here to defend unfounded fear and manufactured guilt.* Much of the fear and guilt which trouble people's lives deserves to be eliminated. Many attempts by people to control others by manipulating fear and guilt should be exposed for what they are and stopped. However, we stand to lose very much if we think every manifestation of fear and guilt is bad and should be eliminated. Fear and guilt have a purpose. To seek to eradicate these two basic emotions, which have been part of the human emotional landscape since creation, is to upset the delicate balance of nature which exists in our psyche, and we do so at our own peril.

In these brief remarks, I will maintain two things:

- 1) fear and guilt, though they can be distorted with disastrous consequences are basically healthy emotions because they have their basis in reality, and
- 2) the good news of the Christian proclamation provides the most adequate basis for dealing with fear and guilt.

In addition, I will attempt to share how I deal with these realities in my daily life as a parish pastor.

Fear and guilt, like other emotions, are among the basic building blocks for conscience formation and maturation. In their healthy form, they are needed for balance and wholeness through all of life, because they have a basis in reality. It's good to be afraid of a bear one meets in the woods. It's healthy to be fearful of water and maintain an active respect for it, even when one is an excellent swimmer. It's important to acknowledge a fear of the dangers of driving a car and thereby maintain caution which one might otherwise abandon. In short, it's a good thing to have fear of the fearful.

I think it is important to remember that "the fearful" is not limited to the material realm. There are many things to fear in the psychological and spiritual realms, as well. It's a healthy thing to fear following a false god, and there are many invitations in our world to attach our loyalties to the wrong things. It is a healthy thing to fear the adoption of any spiritually false notions. I am fearful of popular present-day moral codes which many people adopt where "anything goes" and where there seem to be no standards except to find what is pleasurable at the moment. To ignore true absolutes and elevate to ultimate importance in our lives things which are not ultimate is the most profound mistake we can make in life, and it is greatly to be feared. It has consequences far more serious than meeting a bear in the woods or drowning while we swim. It is a good thing to be afraid of the fearful, and reality includes fearful things.

Guilt also has a basis in reality. The one great fact of human existence which almost everyone will acknowledge — believer and unbeliever alike — is the existence of the reality Christians call "sin." On the basis of the Genesis account, and our own life experience, we believe people have a "fallen nature." We acknowledge that we are sinners. Another way to describe this reality is to point to the vast gap between the "ought" and the "is." Whether we acknowledge it or not, this fundamental discrepancy exists in the world and in your life and mine. We feel this gap by means of guilt. Dr. Karl Menninger, author of the now-famous book, *Whatever Happened to Sin?* maintains that "The big troubles of our time are not mere maladjustment, but *sin!*" Guilt is the symptom — the fever, if you will — which points to the infection of sin.

Jesus once told this parable:

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus within himself, "God, I thank Thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other . . . (Luke 18:10-14).

The Pharisee felt no guilt. The tax collector was wallowing in it. Which man was better off? Not the man who felt no guilt and thought he was righteous, Jesus says. The man who went to his house justified was the man who felt the burden of his guilt, who knew the reality of his condition as he stood before the Almighty. It is easy to see that the tax collector's guilt was a positive, good thing, for it led him to seek the help he needed.

We are like the tax collector. We often fail to say or do the things which we should ("should" by our own value choices and "should" by the dictates of divine revelation which we accept in our faith.) When this happens, then we feel guilty, and appropriately so. These are not mere "guilt feelings" — some internal psychological game which we play with ourselves, but not based on reality — this is real guilt. When I choose what is right and good and endorse a particular code of values and ethical behavior, and then fail to follow my own choices, then I am guilty.

The experience of St. Paul, I believe, is a basic human experience:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Romans 7:15, 19, 24)

Paul's question raises the concern which is both urgent and obvious: Who *will* deliver us from fear and guilt?

It is obvious that many are trying to deliver us. A glance at any bookstore will reveal scores of books offering some expert's counsel or advice for self-help. Many of them are good, but many aren't, because they do not take seriously the fact that fear and guilt are reality-based. They try to deal with fear by denying the fearful. They try to deal with guilt by reducing the "ought" — by making it less demanding, more humanly achievable. Making fear and guilt manageable in this way is an illusion. Many people buy it because it is a comforting illusion, but it will ultimately prove false. Attempts like these to cover up, rather than deal with fear and guilt, are disastrous. Covered up fear and guilt sink to the unconscious, and there is much evidence that they make us sick either psychologically, or physically, or both.

Who, then, *will* deliver us? Many people live lives of daily desperation, burdened with guilt and fear, with no way of dealing with these negative forces. That's like leaving the garbage in the kitchen permanently, and trying to live with it. Much modern-day counsel seems to invite people to pretend they don't feel the guilt which they do feel. That's like locking the garbage up in the closet. Locking garbage in the closet of the unconscious does not make it go away. One must arrange to have the garbage removed. We who acknowledge Jesus as Lord have such arrangements available to us. The arrangements include confession and absolution.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (I John 1:9).

The realities of fear and guilt are part of my daily struggle to be faithful. I deal with them in my own life and in the lives of the people to whom I minister as a parish pastor. My daily encounter with fear and guilt is shaped by my spiritual heritage, especially the particular way in which Lutherans have traditionally handled scripture.

Lutherans pick up the Bible with two handles: law and gospel. We believe that one can mine the truths of God's word only by keeping these two in tension. If one tries to pick up the truth of scripture with only law or gospel, one will be about as successful as the person who tries to pick up a bushel of apples with one handle. In both cases, two handles are needed to do the job.

As I counsel with people, I try to maintain the proper balance of law and gospel. If I'm talking with someone who feels his or her marriage has gone sour, to the point that he or she wants a divorce, and seems to think that changing a spouse is as easy as changing one's place of residence, I might ask, "Do you realize that divorce, among other things, is a failure of the highest magnitude, failure in one of the most important areas of life? Do you realize that divorce is against the will of God, that it is not God's plan and purpose for humankind that we should simply discard a marriage partner when the marriage is no longer satisfying us in the way we think it should be at this particular moment?" These questions are law-oriented, and I acknowledge that they are guilt-producing. I think it is especially important to confront the law when dealing with people who do not seem to take seriously what God's word teaches, people who flow too easily with the cultural permissiveness of our day and think "Anything goes" or "Everyone's doing it."

Sometimes the opposite is the case. A woman of my parish made an appointment with me. She was the picture of grief and remorse. Her husband had been unfaithful in marriage many times. Once, in a fit of bad judgment and attempted revenge, she, too, had had an extramarital sexual affair. This was three years before she came to me, and for those three years, she had been tormented by the guilt of what she had done. She felt that her sin was unforgivable and that she was permanently out of favor with God. She had heard the law. And now she needed to hear the gospel, the good news that God's love extends to the most grievous of sinners, even her. She needed to know that God still loved her, cared for her, wanted the best for her. She needed to believe that because she confessed her sin, God forgave her through the merits of His Son, Jesus Christ. It took a while for this woman to really believe and grab hold of this reality, but when she did, she was the picture of radiant health. She had not covered over her fears and her guilt, but instead, had really dealt with them. Guilt and fear had

not been medicated into oblivion by pop psychology. Rather, they had been treated as the symptoms which point to the deeper illness, the spiritual cancer of sin.

Some time ago, I read about a man who had spent his entire life pursuing feats of daring and bravery, and accomplishing the most incredible variety of achievements I had ever witnessed. He had been deep-sea diving to the bottom of the ocean and had climbed the world's highest mountains. He had been borne aloft by hot air balloons, by gliders, and by every description of airplane, helicopter, parachute and blimp. He had shot the rapids of the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon, had been chased by the bulls in the Palermos, Spain annual ritual, and on and on. His list of accomplishments was truly amazing. When asked why he had done all these things, he said basically that he did not want to get to be an old man and think back and regret that he had not pursued some of the possibilities which had been open to him. "A life of no regrets" — that's what he wanted.

Today, if we wish, we can pursue a life of no regrets. Even more important, we can have a "life of no disabling fear," of "no crippling guilt." This is accomplished not by ignoring fear and guilt, nor by suppressing them, nor by talking ourselves out of these emotions. This is accomplished as a gift, for those who will receive it — a gift of life and salvation from the Father Who loves us, from the Son Who redeems us and from the Spirit Who makes us holy. The triune God sets us free to live — today.
