

12<sup>th</sup> Sunday  
6/21/2020

## THE FEAR FACTOR

Edith Stein was a German, Jewish philosopher who converted from atheism to Catholicism. Like St. Therese, she became a Carmelite nun. During World War II she was arrested by the Gestapo, sent to Auschwitz and killed and today she is a saint. Before her arrest, a number of times she was taken in to be questioned. Walking into the Gestapo office where the usual greeting was, *Heil Hitler*, she once said, *Gelobt sei Jesus Christus—May Jesus Christ be praised*. She noted that humanly speaking it wasn't a wise thing to say at that time but that in the face of such great evil, and in this case, racial hatred, it was important to take a stand. She showed great courage as she acknowledged Jesus.

We could title this gospel, *The Fear Factor*. Jesus uses some form of the word fear four times. There are two types of fear: a healthy fear and fear that leads to evil. If you're out hiking and see an angry grizzly bear, you will be afraid and your fear is going to tell you to avoid that bear. And that's good. It can preserve life. But fear can close us in on ourselves. Fear causes us to be greedy, to separate, to unreasonable suspicion, to prejudice, to racism, to disrespect human life born and unborn. Evil fear imprisons while good fear leads us into the freedom of the children of God.

Fear can cause us to lose trust and faith in God. Fear can be destructive. St. Francis de Sales taught that after sin, the most destructive thing in life is fear. In extreme cases, fear can even lead to violence. People react with violent words or violent actions because they are afraid. When we get angry it's because we're afraid. We're afraid that what we don't want to happen is going to happen. For example, imagine you are driving and you get rear ended, a number of thoughts will go through your mind such as, *I'm going to be late...I'll have to file an insurance report...my rate may go up...I'll have to rent a car...I'll have to pay the deductible*. In other words, all things you are afraid of happening, will be happening.

In today's gospel Jesus talks about both types of fear. This is in the context of sending the twelve out on mission and is part of a larger address Jesus gives them where he says he's sending them out like lambs among wolves. To preach and witness to the truth to those not interested in hearing the truth can be scary and even dangerous. Think of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who to this day, face persecution and death for their faith in Christ. And yet Jesus tells them not

to be afraid but rather to trust. Trust, which is another way of saying faith, is the antidote to fear or at least treatment for fear. Just as there is a fear factor, so too, there is a trust factor. And yet at the same time, he tells them to be afraid of those who can destroy both soul and body. He says that because evil is real and his will is for us to stay in the good.

So there is a bad fear that disposes us to what is evil and a good fear that steers us away from evil and toward the good. You could call this fear of others and fear of the Lord. Jesus says quite plainly, *fear no one*. But fear of the Lord is something different. I remember being nine years old sitting in a Confirmation class when I learned that one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is fear of the Lord and I wondered about that. The teacher explained that fear of the Lord means respect and reverence for God. Years later as a seminarian during a summer parish assignment, I went with a deacon who did prison ministry to visit a jail. With the inmates, we ended up discussing fear of the Lord. The deacon explained it in terms of love. He said that if you love someone you don't want to hurt that person, you're even afraid of hurting that person because of the love you have for that person.

Pope Benedict once said, *To be without fear of the Lord, leads us to put ourselves in God's place and even to set ourselves up as arbiters of life and death*. Psalm 111 says, *The fear of the Lord is the first stage of wisdom*. In other words, it's the beginning of wisdom but not its conclusion. St. John says *Perfect love casts out fear*. When our love is perfect, we're not afraid and it's easy to look around our own hearts and our world to realize that our love is far from perfect. Or as a philosopher no less eminent than Yoda from *Star Wars* has said, *Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate.. to suffering*

We're called to not be afraid and to acknowledge Jesus before others as Edith Stein did. Now that can seem scary, but it doesn't mean standing on a soapbox or talking at people rather than to people, but it does mean being willing to live our faith, to model our faith and to talk about our faith.

Here in the Eucharist, we encounter the perfect love of God shown by the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. Here we find a perfect love, an everlasting love and here we can be strengthened to grow in trust, in faith, in courage and in the ability to love. Here we're strengthened to live lives of intentional faith, *in every little way*. Here the fear factor can go down and the trust factor go up. May we always acknowledge Jesus by our faith, by our words, by our actions and by our love.