

Fall Start-ups – Help!

.So we are heading into the Fall season. Summer holidays are over. Schools begin. Announcements during worship get longer! For many of us, Fall marks the return to regular rhythms and responsibilities. That is certainly true in our gathered life as a church. We have a summer rhythm of rest that has taken hold over the last number of years. Committees don't meet. We pare things down to Sunday worship and social gatherings - even laundry program and crossroads take a mini-break or part of the summer. If you have newly connected here over the summer, be assured that there is more action than you've seen lately. We have been intentional about taking a break in our corporate efforts as a church, partly in response to the need to take Sabbath more seriously.

Of course, when Fall does arrive, and we do step back into these routines, I've found over the years that the return to Fall routines produces a mixed response. Some folks are excited; some are overwhelmed. Let me take a little test to see how you are doing. On a scale of 1-10, how many of you are looking forward to the Fall? I'll give you three options. How many are pumped and ready to go—a 9 or 10? Pass another sign-up sheet around to those people and get them to sign up now. How many are okay, had a good summer, 6-8? How many are 5 or below?

However you enter into the Fall, I think we can all relate to the feeling of “oh, oh, here we go again! Which raises the question: Why give ourselves to all this again? How might we enter in our Fall rhythms and work in a way that is more life-giving rather than life-taking?

If you are new here, you will discover that this is a community that seeks to take up the call of God to seek first the kingdom of God, the renewed and restored world Jesus had inaugurated. This call is both joyful and – plenty of hard work. Whenever we hand out this long survey listing all the ways to be involved in our work as a church, inevitably someone feels overwhelmed.

If you are feeling a little overwhelmed as you head into the Fall, one exercise that I have found helpful over the years is to name what it is that is making me most fearful. What fears are you holding as you head into the Fall?

Finding your Number – the Enneagram

To help us explore our fears, I'm going to give a little Enneagram quiz. How many of you have ever tried to identify your enneagram number? I'm a newbie to the Enneagram. I have found it helpful for knowing what responses I lean towards in a situation. Especially in situations of fear. In their book, “The Wisdom Of The Enneagram”, Don Riso and Ross Hudson list the nine core fears corresponding to the 9 personality types the Enneagram lists. – You can see them on the screen:

Type 1 – The fear of being evil or corrupt.

Type 2 – The fear of being unloved or unwanted by others.

Type 3 – The fear of being unaccomplished and worthless.

Type 4 – The fear of lacking a unique, significant identity.

Type 5 – The fear of being helpless and inadequate.

Type 6 – The fear of being without support or guidance

Type 7 – The fear of deprivation and pain.

Type 8 – The fear of being harmed or controlled by others

Type 9 – The fear of loss and separation from others.

The idea here is that the fears we experience in childhood impact how we respond to situations as an adult. Is there one that stands out for you? By the way, it's considered uncouth to go around and tell someone else what their enneagram number is. Just in case you were already figuring out your colleague's number. (I do know Joy's number by the way if anyone wants to ask me later).

The Impact of Fear

I gave you this list to make us aware of what some primary human fears are. And these are only a small number of the many types of fears we have. If we making a list of top 10 fears, we might fear of losing our job, or fear of financial collapse, or larger issues like the impacts of climate change. What else would be on a top 10 fear list? It's no wonder fears drive us so much when there are so many of them.

Now there are some things we should have a healthy concern about. It doesn't seem like many of us are concerned enough of climate change to change how we live, for example. Yet even where a healthy concern is justified, fear can distort our vision and our actions. Fear may make us immobile. Governments have learned how effective fear can be for winning elections and taking people's eyes off of issues that really do need addressing. Fear sells.

All reasons why do well to be aware of what fears might be motivating our behaviour.

So what fears are you carrying into the Fall? Are there one or two that stand out? Take a few minutes to write these down. Just write on one side of the paper since I'm going to ask you to write something else on the back later. You aren't going to hand these in or show them to anyone else/ only you will see them. We'll come back to them near the end.

Stories Full of Fears

One interesting feature of this chapter that Melody presented part of us to today, Matthew 8, is that fear looms large in these stories. In each of the stories, there are things people could be afraid of and some that they very much are afraid of. In the first three stories, we meet people dealing with physical impairment, illness and death. All things that can make us fearful, although the centurion whose story we heard doesn't seem to be afraid. Which is interesting. I want to look with you at why he is not afraid in a moment. In the fifth story, the disciples are afraid that they are going to die from the winds and waves on the sea. In the last story, the spirits of evil are afraid of Jesus.

All are stories where fear is potentially or actually prominent. So how does Jesus respond to these fearful situations? That's what I want to explore with you today. Chapter 8 in Matthew's gospel follows Jesus' teaching in the sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7 that we read during Lent. In those chapters, Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses, offering a renewed Torah, a renewed vision for what it means to be the people called to bear God's light into the world. There, Jesus is presented as the new Great prophet, the new law-giver.

Jesus as "one who has Authority"

At the end of the sermon on the mount, Matthew writes these words. "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, ²⁹ *because he taught as one who had authority*, and not as their teachers of the law." He taught as one who had authority.

As we move into chapter 8 and 9, Matthew shows us this authority *in action*. In each story, Jesus demonstrates his authority in a way which overcomes fear. In the first story where Jesus encounters a man with a shrivelled hand, he shows his authority to heal leprosy, a physical disease. But of course, leprosy also separated you from society, so he is to go show himself to the priest and get a clean bill of health so he can take up his place in community again.

In the second story which we heard, Jesus uses his authority not only to heal the soldier's servant but to extend the welcome of God to one who would be considered the people's enemy. In the story of the disciples on the boat in the storm, Jesus demonstrates his authority to calm the winds / to heal creation and save the disciples. In the final story, he uses his authority to deliver people from evil. Jesus is a man with demonstrated authority.

Suspicion of Authority

When people describe our age as a society, they often describe it as one that is marked by *suspicion* of authority, an erosion of trust in both leaders and institutions. With valid reason, right? We have seen people again and again use authority, positions of power for self-serving reasons. I know some of you have experienced this reality at work yourselves with a superior, or at school, some at the hands of someone you trusted deeply, a reality for so many women and men who have been sexually abused. On a larger scale, we see this misuse and abuse of authority across all sectors of society by some of our political, business, educational, non-profit and church leaders. No wonder we are suspicious of authority.

Notice how differently Jesus uses his authority in this chapter. As Tom Wright says in commenting on this chapter, **"Jesus doesn't have power for its own sake. He has authority in order to be the healer."** Jesus uses his authority to heal and restore. And he does it consistently throughout the gospels.

The church fathers and mothers of the first 500 years of the church often wrote about God's simplicity. By that they didn't mean that God is without mystery but rather that God is not divided like we are. Do you feel that division within yourself at times, being pulled this way and then that in an ethical situation. God isn't like that. God is undivided, if indeed God is like Jesus. Read the gospels for yourselves. Jesus always lifts up the downtrodden, always restores the shamed who come before him. Jesus is undivided, consistent. And he consistently uses his authority to heal and restore. He is the kind of leader you can trust, in any situation.

The Soldier's Trust

Which is what we are invited to do as we hear each of these stories today from Matthew 8. Consider that story of the Roman soldier again. Here was a man who represented oppressive power, the kind that could get you beaten if you couldn't pay your tax, or killed if he perceived you as a trouble maker, the kind of authority that made you nervous just by his presence. This is a man with authority, but it wasn't generally a benevolent authority. He represents the kind of authority that makes you squirm with discomfort.

Yet what is surprising is that this centurion, a man with a position of high authority, approaches Jesus, a man with *no position* of authority, and asks him for help. The centurion not only acknowledges that Jesus' authority is greater than his authority, he has utter confidence that Jesus will use his authority to heal rather than harm. This is how Jesus is known. So the soldier says to him: "But just say the word, and my servant will be healed."

Jesus is amazed by this man's faith and trust in him. He names this man's faith as a sign of the many people from all nations who will follow him to share in God's feast, an Old Testament symbol of God's restoration. This man trusted Jesus' authority; rather than being afraid or fearful, he put his faith in Jesus.

What would it mean for you to replace the fears you are carrying this Fall with faith in Jesus? What would it mean for you to replace the fears you are carrying this Fall with faith in Jesus? I'm going to ask you to consider your response to that question in a moment.

Before we do that, I want to notice one other aspect of Jesus' authority in the other story that Melody presented.

Jesus' call to follow the way of suffering

In that story, we meet a man who has witnessed Jesus' demonstration of his authority over illness and disease. Jesus has already convinced him that he is more than a prophet, that he is a man who uses his authority to heal. And the man is convinced. He declares his allegiance to Jesus. "I'll follow you wherever you go".

Yes, Jesus says, if you are going to follow, you better know what you are getting into. This isn't just a triumphant march of watching someone who has power and authority. This is a commitment to one whose authority leads him to the places where the world is in its deepest pain to be there with and for those who are suffering. Even foxes and birds have places to go when they are tired. Jesus had a temporary home in Capernaum but his mission was leading him to go on the road, to the streets and lanes, wherever God's people are in need. He will have no place to lay his head until he rests it when he finally hung from a cross.

And then Jesus says what was among his most shocking sayings. The saying is a response to a disciple of Jesus who tells Jesus that he must first go bury his father before he follows him further. To understand how shocking Jesus' response is, we need some cultural context here. In Jewish culture, burying your parents was one of your foremost duties. We know that from the writings of Jewish Rabbis how important burying your parents was because it was one of the only things that could legitimately pre-empt you from saying the Shema, the words of praying beginning with "hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord." A faithful Jew then and now says the Shema as they arise in the morning. Burying your parents was one of the only things that could pre-empt saying the Shema. It was that important.

So when this man tells Jesus he can't follow him because he has to go bury his father, folks in that day would have expected Jesus to say, "Well of course you must do that, and then come and follow me." But he doesn't. Instead he says, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead".

The point is this: What Jesus was doing is so important, so urgent, so vital that it took precedence over everything else. He was embodying God's return as king, re-establishing a world where God's purposes were being lived out. He was about to die himself in order that he might bring new life to the world. This was moment for which the Jewish people had been called. And if you were going to follow Jesus, he called you to get in step with him on this pivotal work of sacrificial love and healing

Why Jesus' authority can be Threatening

Here we get at I think the main reason we may be tempted to *reject* Jesus' authority. To reject it. It's not because Jesus is a divided or selfish leader. No, Jesus consistently uses his authority to heal and restore. We may be tempted to reject Jesus' authority because Jesus calls us to follow him into the streets and lanes, among people who are suffering. He calls us to take up, again, the costly, difficult, sacrificial way that he himself took. To put it another way: Jesus' authority to heal comes hand in hand with his authority calling us to follow him into places and among people suffering. It's a package deal. A while later in Matthew's gospel, Jesus would say this even more strongly. "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Jesus comes to heal and restore you, not so that you can do your own thing however you please, but so that you can participate in the healing of the world by following him in the way of sacrificial love.

Does that sound heavy? Demanding? In a way it is. So why do it? Why take up this hard way and work that Jesus calls us to?

The Gift of Living under Jesus' Authority

I want to suggest that taking the authority of Jesus more seriously would help us take up this sacrificial way of life. By that, I mean if we were to live with a greater awareness, daily, that Jesus is exercising his authority in the world by the Spirit to heal and restore, we would be a little less weighed down. In particular, we would be less weighed down with the sense that we have to make everything or anything happen. If Jesus is indeed at work in the world by the Spirit, then it's not all up to us.

A Helpful Mentor

One of my mentors, who is also a mentor to many in our congregation, is Charles Ringma. Charles and Rita lived across the street in a little basement hovel for 8 years where Wednesday morning neighbourhood prayers began and many new ideas were dreamed up for how we could love this city.

Charles and Rita were so helpful for many of us because they had travelled further down road than we had but one that was similar to ours. They had lived a deeper shared life, many years in community housing. They had come alongside the poor – and the rich – calling people into a kingdom way of life, and to the pursuit of justice and shalom.. They had taken theology seriously, discerning how to work out the way of the kingdom in the arts, the academy and in business. Many of the same directions we have gone and are going as a community.

Charles works very hard. I think it's partly the strict Dutch upbringing he had. He is a disciplined person who uses his time well, although he also seems to be able to make time for you. He modelled this sacrificial way of love.

One thing I have observed and learned from Charles is that he expects Jesus to be at work -- in people, in communities and within the structures of society. He often prays sitting next to people in busses or airplanes, asking if there is a word he might have for this person believing that God is at work in them, and God has given him surprising words. He helps bring people together to respond to societal issues, believing that God's Spirit will energize and lead that group to make a real difference – it's happened.. He engages in both protests and dialogues “within systems of power”, trusting that God will work through both these kinds of efforts because God loves people and institutions and is seeking to restore them both. When he prays with people for healing, he expects the Spirit to both lead their prayers and heal people's hearts and minds and bodies.

He lives as though Jesus has authority to bring transformation -- and as though Jesus continues to do this work.

Of course, he also loves to celebrate and party. One of the reasons he can is because is it he's very aware that it isn't all up to him. He takes up his part in the play with a lot of energy but he knows very clearly w darn well that Jesus was the start of the show.

Are you living as though Jesus has authority to bring transformation -- and as though Jesus continues to do this restoring work? I struggle to live that way sometimes. Today you are being invited to take up your responsibilities this Fall under the authority of Jesus, confident, and that he will use his authority to bring healing and restoration, confident that the one who gives his life away for Jesus will find it.

I invite you to take that sheet of paper again. *What would it mean for you to replace the fears you are carrying this Fall with faith in Jesus?* How might knowing that Jesus is at work to bring healing and restoration change how you take up your responsibilities this Fall?

I am going to invite you to sit with that question this now and then for your own memory, write any words you get on the back of your card.