

## OVERCOMING FEAR

Wednesday, July 17, 2024

Rev. Richard Rogers

Okay, usually I start with a question; tonight, I'm going to start with a story. And it's a story about little Johnny and little Jane. And you're watching them go to the ... We're at a baseball game or a softball game, and you're watching them go up to the batting circle and getting ready for their time at bat. And because you love them so much, you're shouting things to them like, *"I believe in you! You can do it!"* And everything in you wants to motivate them and have them believe they can do it and be inspired. And so you're shouting all these well wishes at them. And you notice that it doesn't seem to be working so well. They're still seeming just as frightened, just as concerned, just as upset.

So you get this bright idea -- this genius moment -- and you call them over to you and you say, *"You know what? I love you so much, I don't care if you strike out. I love you so much, it doesn't matter to me one iota what happens next."* And you can see in that moment that they take a big breath and then it gets to be a lot more fun to go swing at the plate.

And what I want you to see: over the last 40 years culturally, there's been a movement to inspire, to believe, to uplift the people around us. And we, I think, as a culture, are better at it. I mean, you look at our commercials; we are about inspiring and believing and we are more verbal in our praise and our acknowledgement of each other.

And yet, when you look at our culture, we have more people on anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medication. And so something's not working! Because you think if you're believing in someone, it should make them feel better! If you're motivating and inspiring, they should get on board and go hit a home run! And so why is it not working?

Because what I want you to see is that, when people are often inspiring us, it actually increases the internal pressure to perform. When you say, *"Oh, you can hit a home run,"* I hear it as I have to hit a home run. That a base hit or a walk or a strikeout or a fielder's choice is no longer appropriate then unless it's a home run. Because I have the ability to hit a home run. Listen to all those people! They believe that I can hit a home run! And if they believe I can get a home run, I better hit a home run!

Now, do you know what the probability is of even getting on base? A major leaguer, if they're at .300, that means they only get to base 30% of the time. Thirty percent of the time is outstanding! So the likelihood of sending a child to the plate is that, at least 70% of the time, they're going to whiff. Right?

And if we believe in them, is that helpful? Well, at some level, yes. But what's powerful -- what's transformative -- is when they know that they're loved no matter what. Now we just get to play! Because whether I win, lose, or draw, it's just as fun now. I know I'm going to get loved no matter what. So now I want to swing for the fences, because I know that I'm secure in love.

And I want us to look at this in our culture, because I believe the pressure to perform is becoming greater and greater in our society. And I believe it's not helping us. I believe that this pressure to be great; this pressure to prove ourselves; this pressure to overcome; this pressure to be amazing isn't always helpful. And while, for some of us, we actually are making it harder for our loved ones to excel, because they believe they have to meet what they hear is our expectations for them.

And what if, tonight, we gave the people around us permission to be lousy; to strike out; to fumble; to make all kinds of mistakes, because they know that they're going to be loved no matter what. That love is now bigger than whatever we're setting out to do. And, in that process, I actually believe it sets us free.

**You know, my talk tonight is about overcoming fear. And I truly believe that there's only one way to overcome fear ... and that's more love. And I believe the fear and the anxiety that we live in is a symptom of the fact that we don't have enough love.** That most of us do not feel that we have enough love in our life. We have some, but I'm not sure we feel like we have enough.

And one of the ways that I think that we can tell whether we actually have enough love in our life is when we begin to look at our fears and our anxiety as a benchmark to say, *"Yes, I have enough love."* Because the moment we have anxiety and fear in our life, I think it should be a little flag that goes off and says, *"Oh, wait; I'm anxious about this"* or *"I'm worried about this"* or *"I'm fearful of this."* And at that moment, we need to realize, *"Oh! I need more love."*

Because in the presence of our fears, there's really only three ways to deal with them.

The first way is what most of us are really good at. And that's whatever way, **we choose to be unconscious about our fears.** Right? That all of us have our own strategy so that we don't feel our fears. Some of us just want to go to sleep; you know, pull the covers back over our head. Some of us like food or alcohol or drugs or shopping. But all of them are just ways that we distract ourselves from realizing that we're anxious and afraid.

And what's interesting for me is that, when you can actually look at: How do you manage your anxiety and your fears? How do you do it right now? Like, how do you manage when you notice that you're anxious and afraid? You know, what's your system? Do you just pretend like you don't see it? *"Duh, duh duh, duh, duh, duh; I'm just not going to look over there."*

So, the first one is we go unconscious.

Two: Susan Jeffers many years ago wrote a book called, *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*. How many of you are familiar with this concept, right, of this book? And it's this idea that, of course you're going to feel afraid, and you just suck it up and do it anyway. Right? And there's some truth to this.

You know, her quote is, *"The only way to get rid of the fear of doing is to go out and do it. Every time we encounter something that forces us to 'just handle it,' our self-esteem is raised considerably. You learn to trust that you will survive, no matter what happens. And in this way your fears are diminished immeasurably. The fear will never go away as long as you continue to grow."*

And I want you to see that there's a level of truth to that. If you're growing and changing, there's going to be a level of anxiety at doing things that you've never done before. There's going to be a level ... With growth comes change and with change comes a level of uncertainty. And what I want you to see is that, as we are growing and changing and moving in new and different directions, we are going to experience a level of fear and anxiety.

Now, is one of the strategies I want you to have at your disposal, **feel the fear, acknowledge the fear, and do it anyway?** Yes!

You know, I've had a lifetime of working with fear. I always believed that when I got to a certain age that I wasn't going to be afraid anymore. Has anybody ever had that thought or that experience? Like, that I was going to actually mature into a place of no fear.

And I remember my first real -- first real fear that I remember -- was about nine or 10 going to the high school pool. And the high school pool had a high dive. And all my buddies and I, we rode our bikes down to the pool. And we kind of dared ... no, not kind of! We double-dog dared each other to go off the high dive. So we all lined up on the ladder. We waited for our time. And we're all lined up on the ladder. And I get to the top of the ladder; I'm on the top of the ladder. I'm looking down. And I know one or two

things is going to happen: I'm either going to die or my friends are going to harass me forever. Because there's no way I'm jumping off this diving board!

And I think ... And I look back and I think, *"I don't care! I would rather be harassed for the rest of my life."* And so I excuse myself and climb back down the ladder. And it's got kids all on the ladder going up, and I kind of work my way back down. And I think, *"I'll be harassed. The summer's not going to last forever."* So, at 10, I had enough self-awareness to know that I could survive that. And I knew that I wasn't going to survive diving off the board.

Now, years later. The Willis Tower used to be called the Sears Tower. Family's on vacation. One of the things we wanted to do was go up to the top of the Sears Tower. We went to the top of the Sears Tower. We got off. My kids were small. They go running out of the elevator to the observation window and I am ... You know, remember the cat with the claws and the old poster? I am on the back of that elevator. And now I have got my fear of heights; it is in full bloom? It is ... It takes everything I have just to get out of the elevator and stand on the back wall, and finally just sit down on a bench as the kids are running for the glass.

And I think, *"If that glass breaks, we're going to have to start a new family."* [Congregants laugh] *"Because there's no way I'm going to go out there. I can't save 'em! I can't go out there."* And finally, they kind of coax me, like, halfway to the window. And it was like, I was done.

So the next experience with that was, the following spring we were doing a series on freedom. And I was doing a talk on overcoming fears. And that week I decided I was going to jump out of an airplane. [Congregants laugh] Because I figured if I went and really just went all the way, it was going to work. So I decided that week that I was going to go jump out of a plane.

Drove down to Eloi and took the little class, and you've got 400 pounds. Now, at that time I was not as big as I am now, but at that time I was still most of 400 pounds. So the person that they found for me was the smallest master jumper they could find. And the way that it worked -- right? -- is the master jumper had the parachute on his back, but he was a good foot shorter than I am. So, I then had to put him and the parachute like a backpack. So, he -- literally -- when we were strapped in, he couldn't touch the ground. [Congregants laugh] Like, his little feet were just kicking and he couldn't touch the ground, right? I mean, he was probably a buck twenty, right?

And so, we crawled into the plane and I couldn't look. I just could not look! And we got to 14,000 feet. And the door opens and the light comes on, and they say, *"Jump; jump; jump."* And, you know, we spent all morning practicing our form. And I get to the door and I think, *"I've got life insurance."* [Congregants laugh] And I jump!

And I ... I can't find the airport. I can't find the airport! Like, you ... Like, we were so high, I'm like, *"I'm not sure where we're going. Like, I'm, I'm, I'm, I can't find it!"* You know, and he's having me move my hands. And we turn this way and then we turn this way. And we do this and we do this. And I don't care about any of that; I just don't want to have to walk very far with this guy on my back, right? [Congregants laugh]

So at about 4,000 feet, he begins moving his hand in front of my face to make sure I haven't fainted so that I'll pull the chute. Now, has anybody ever jumped out of a plane? Anybody done that? When you jump out of a plane, you get a wedgie like there's no business! Right? So you're taking the full weight of the moving down at that velocity. And imagine they take the back of your underwear and lift you over a house, because that's what it feels like. [Congregants laugh] They take the back of your underwear and just lift you over a house. And it hurts so bad, but you really don't care, because you know that that means that the chute is up and you are going to live. right?

And so I made it! And one of the most amazing things happened from that experience. That, from that moment, I have never been afraid of heights. Gone; just gone.

And so what I want you to hear is that I believe, that to feel the fear and do it anyway, that at some level it 100% works! Because every time you have the courage to take on a fear and walk through it, at some level it empowers us to know that we are greater than that fear.

And the third way -- and the way that I think is the most important -- is that we look at fear. That I believe in the presence of fear ... **Fear is a sign that we need more love, and that fear is actually an opportunity for us to go deeper into ourselves.** And that, when we notice the fear -- when we begin to notice our anxiety -- we actually stop and turn within. Because in John 14:18: *"Perfect love casts out fear."* Perfect love casts out fear!

What I want you to see today is that: I believe in the world we have an unbelievable amount of anxiety and fear. That **fear is rising at an incredible rate. And the way that we master that -- the way that we overcome that; the way that we change that -- is through love.** As a world; as a culture; as people, we don't have enough love. We are trying to deal with all the things that are going on in our world today, and we're not full.

And that, every time we notice anxiety or fear in our life, what I invite you to look at: to turn within -- to stop -- and say, *"Where do I need more love in my life? What issue is this anxiety bringing to my awareness that I can actually stop and love myself right there to fill my heart -- to fill my soul -- with all the love that I need so that I can walk through these experiences of life and not be anxious and afraid?"*

If we're regularly anxious and afraid, I believe that we owe it to ourselves to stop and say, *"How do I love myself right here so that I can move beyond the anxiety and the fears to know myself in a new way?"*

Because at some level, we're all that little boy or little girl going up to the batter's box of life, and we're afraid we're going to strike out. And what we don't really, truly deeply, profoundly know is: Is there enough love if we strike out? And in the presence of enough love, we're okay. We're willing to swing for the fences.

And so, tonight, I want to challenge us. I want your homework to be: instead of just pretending that you're not anxious or afraid -- or just muscling through it -- I want there to be times in your life where you ask yourself the deeper question: *"Where is that anxiety in me? Where does that fear live in me? And can I love myself right there in a way that would be transformative? In a way where I would feel freedom and where I would feel a level of change?"*

Because being more anxious -- being more afraid -- is not helping our culture. We are not moving forward, because we are becoming more and more frightened as a people.

**So how do I love myself? How do you love yourself in a way that sets you free? And maybe even the bigger question: How do you allow God to love you in a way that heals your heart of all anxiety and fear?**

See, I think this is one of the most important things that -- as individuals and as family members -- we need to be looking at. Because we have people in our own life and our own families that are scared; they're anxious; they're afraid. And they have no idea what to do with that. And the best that we usually offer them is medication. And so, what happens is they just don't know how scared they are. But we're not healing. Not really.

And so, what if tonight, you made a decision that anytime you felt anxious and afraid, for at least a moment you would stop; you would check in; you would listen to yourself; and you would actually open

your heart to you. You'd actually love yourself the way you want to be loved. To see if your love was actually sufficient enough to alleviate the fear.

So is it true that God loves you? Yes!

*"God loves me."*

Let's say that together: *"God loves me."*

And to the degree that you open your heart to you, I want you to see that you're actually going to be setting yourself free. Like, most of us are great at loving everybody else, or at least better. You know, we're better at loving everybody else than we are loving ourselves. And what if, tonight, every time you notice – every time! – you notice you're anxious or afraid, you actually stop for a moment; for an hour; for 10 minutes, and say, *"How do I love myself right there? How do I allow God to love me right there."*

**Perfect love casts out fear, but we have to be willing to stop the madness for a moment and love ourselves enough that we change the way it feels to be us.**

Will you pray with me?

I invite you to open your mind, your heart, your soul to love: to pure love, to God love. And I want you to just notice the times maybe in the last day or week where you've been anxious or afraid. And so many times we don't even want to know that; we don't want to even be aware of it. We go unconscious. And what if, tonight, you simply stop for a moment and gave and offered yourself the love that you've wanted? To let yourself be loved? To let God love you right there.? And to see, over and over again: as we turn to love, we actually set ourselves free.

So, in the name and through the power of the living Christ, we give thanks. And so it is. Amen.

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