Sermon *Love is the Medicine for Fear*
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 10.18.26

My closest friend Alex; Father Alex Andahar – he and I do a weekly podcast together besides just being friends – Alex is a big fan of DC comics and Marvel… and I am not. I don't know anything about those universes and I don't really want to know anything about but he is so enthralled by it that as his friend I decided to try watching one show. HBO came out with a show called Lanterns. The plot is that there's a Green Lantern and a new lantern guy coming up, a new apprentice. The person who is chosen to be the Lantern is the human who has no fear. And here's my problem: humans have fear; it's built into our brains. It is an evolutionary trait. If you don't have fear, you're not human.

I've been thinking about fear and I've been thinking about its effect on all of us. When I was on sabbatical, I read a book by Joseph Nygen called *The Overthinker's Guide to Making Decisions*. I don't have problems making decisions but there is a part of this book that I do struggle with and that is the overthinking side. The author highlights two different aspects of our brain. There is one that he calls intuition or inner wisdom, which I'll continue to refer to as inner wisdom. Inner wisdom is a part of our brain that comes up with thoughts or ideas in stillness and in calmness that are gentle and they are not rushed. We know when we have accessed that part of our brain because we too will start to breathe easier. We'll start to imagine things differently and it brings calmness and it brings peace.

The other side of the brain is the fear side of our brain and it is where we get the fight or flight or hide. The idea of the Overthinker's Guide is to move out of the fear side of the brain which wants us to either fight, run or hide.

Before I go on, I need to say that side of the brain – the fear side – is really important. It helps us every time we cross the street; every time we buy sushi at Publix, there's a warning like *does it smell right? Is this going to am I going to survive it?* Nothing against Publix or sushi but on Wednesdays I occasionally get their five dollar deal. But, you know, like any food, you have to smell it first, right? There is this basic thinking that is built into our brain to know if we are safe. All of you did it when you walked into this building. All of you did it when you got into the car. All of you did it when you went on to Gulf of Mexico Drive. There is the sense of *am I safe?* It's really really important and it makes us human. It helps us survive. But, if you spend too much time on the fear side, it can run your life.

The other side of the brain – inner wisdom – is the stillness, the calmness, the inner-wisdom-voice that tells you when you're in love. The inner wisdom side is when you know you need to make a sacrifice for someone you love. Creativity, art, music, expression of love – it all comes not from the fear side but the inner wisdom side.

For a variety of pastoral reasons, I've been doing reading and thinking about fear and its effects on us individually and as a society. According to the American Psychological Association, they do a Stress in America Survey. We have the results from 2025 (waiting for '26 to come out). And folks, it's not good. Before I go on, what is the difference between stress and fear? Fear is the sudden and automatic fight or flight or hide. Stress is fear prolonged. So fear is stress that is

habitual or chronic fear that just goes on and on and on. The Stress Survey shows a majority of Americans say their stress level has increased over the last five years: 75% reporting physical or emotional symptoms related to stress. 75% of Americans have self-reported that stress is having an emotional or a physical symptom in their bodies.

Let's let that sink in for a moment. It is hard to get 75% of Americans to report anything. That means three out of four drivers on the Gulf of Mexico right now driving around with physical ore emotional symptoms of chronic fear. Three out of four people in line at Publix right now are feeling the physical or emotional effects of fear and running through their lives in a chronic way.

I'd love for this to be different, but perhaps 75% of the people hearing this message right now would also report having physical or mental symptoms of stress. That tells me I need to talk about it in parish ministry.

The Survey goes on: the American Psychological Association says that this is not a small bump. It has been a sustained upward trend, and it's fueled by a mix of uncertainty, polarization, health, and finances. In 2023, 3 years ago, 55% of adults said that the political climate was a significant stressor, which was up from 46% in 2020. Do you think that number has decreased? Probably not. After all, do you know what is happening on the first Tuesday of November? Have you received any sort of advertisement in the mail or watched an advertisement on TV about what is coming up in two weeks and two days? We are in a political cycle and stress is a part of it or fear is running through it. The article concludes with this: *ambient social stress is hard to control because it's tied to events outside of each individual's direct influence. The non-stop news cycle, social media make it nearly impossible to disconnect. Meaning that these stressors or these fears can feel constan*t.

That's the environment in which I am addressing you today and it's the environment All Angels is called to bring the Living Christ to – both inside and outside the Church. We do so in a time of stress and fear. As a way to begin this journey recognizing the fear that is running through many of our lives, the discussion group article that we have for this week is titled *Love is Medicine for Fear*. It was written by Arthur Brooks in the Atlantic. In the article, Brooks wrote that Chinese philosopher Lasu wrote 2500 years ago this, "*Through love, one has no fear*." Through love one has no fear. 500 years later the apostle John St. John wrote in his letter *there is no fear in love. Love drives out fear. Fear has to do with punishment and love is not punishment. There is no fear in love*.

We have built into our brain the fear factor of fight, flight or hide. We also have built into our brain inner stillness, wisdom, calmness and peace. There is one more piece to discuss and that is the capacity to love and to be loved. Love is counterweight to fear and chronic stress.

Arthur Brooks goes on and he writes this, "The world of the 21st century is safer for the vast majority of us than of all the world's previous eras. The real issue is that we have too little love in our lives to protect us against our fears." In other words, we are living in a safer world yet fear is really high. And his suggestion is that fear is high because we have too little love in our lives. This is where the church comes in.

In today's Gospel lesson, when there are all sorts of fear going on around Jesus, around Ceasar, King Herod Agrippa, the fate of the Hebrews and Israel being occupied by the Roman Empire. Inflation and high taxation made it so many had to leave their occupations and head into the various cities in the region to look for work. In the opposition's mind, Jesus was making all of this worse. He was getting people excited about faith and they started following Him. In their fear, the Jewish religious leaders sided with the Herodians (those who support the puppet King Herod) and tried to trip up Jesus with a question: *is it lawful* (in Jewish law) *to pay taxes to the emperor?*

The simple, religious answer is "no". That's what they were looking for. By saying "no" they could hand Jesus over to the Roman authorities. Instead, Jesus said: Show me the coin. Once they did (which, by the way, was a trap but is not a part of this sermon), Jesus asked a simple question: "Whose image is this." They replied, "Ceasar's." Jesus then said, "Give then to Ceasar what is Ceasar's and give to God what belongs to God." It is a tremendous answer. But, for the purposes of looking at fear and the side of brain that brings inner wisdom, let's focus on his question.

Jesus asked, "Whose image is this?" I love that question. And that question reverberates throughout time. *Whose image is this?* Every coin back then had the image of Caesar and it had a title which is claimed him to be a deity; claiming him to be a god. That's what was stamped onto the coin. Looking at it, Jesus asks: Whose image is this? He also asks whose image are you made in? The answer is we believe through faith that we are created in the image of God. And it doesn't mean that God has 10 fingers and 10 toes. It's not that God is bipedal and can walk around on two feet just fine. That is not necessarily the image of God. The image of God is imprinted deep inside of us. That image of God is the stillness, the inner wisdom, the love, the joy, the peace that we have been stamped. That image – your image, my image – is also living in the world of Caesar which is a physical world that we live in. There are certain things we have to do to survive. We know that. Part of it is working and a part of it is also paying taxes. And along with Caesar's world comes the ability, the need, to have fear. It's a good thing to have a little fear every time you cross a street. … because it's Caesar's world. We live with the image of God stamped on us in the world of Caesar and what it is to be physical and living in a physical world.

Arthur Brooks writes that there is a way to act in love in a fearful world. The first act is be overt about your love. Tell somebody you love them. Tell somebody you care for them. Tell somebody you haven't said in a long time. Send them a note. Just say *hey I really appreciate this about you*. I love this about you. Be overt about it because love will drive out fear.

The person you make love overt to might be someone who's having a physical symptom of stress and fear in their life and suddenly they get a note that says, "Hey, I love you." What does that do? It shifts the mind. It moves us into a place of inner stillness. It brings us to peace and inner wisdom just by hearing that we are loved.

I've said it before and I will say it again, I had a poster that my mom put up in my room that I would look at every day going into my room and leaving my room. And the poster said this, "You are lovable and capable." *You are lovable and capable*. The image of God that has been stamped on me and stamped on the rest of you is someone who is lovable and someone who is

also capable of love. It is stamped on every one of us. The fear side will step in. The fear side will start to do overthinking. The fear side will start to say, "I need to control the uncontrollable."

The fear side will say this:
I'm going to start thinking about every single aspect
and about every single thing in my life,
and I'm going to think and process it through
so that I can have some sort of control
over things that I have no control over.

That is not from the inner wisdom side of the brain. That is from the fear side that is trying to control things uncontrollable. That poster was put up in my room when I was in fourth grade; when I was in fourth grade, I had very little control over most aspects of my life. I was told when to go to school, when to come home, what to eat. But as we get older, we get more and more autonomy. We start to have control of things. And then from what I understand towards later part of life, it's like we're back in fourth grade again. We start or we recognize the things that we have no control over. We don't control the narrative of what's happening out in Caesar's world. We don't control what is happening in violence in our schools which as you can see is a major source of fear for me. We don't have control over it. But we do have control is switching to inner wisdom and peace. We have control of telling somebody being overt about our love.

Another act that we can do to counter fear with love, according to Albert Brooks, is love our enemies. This is one of the hardest things that Christians have to do – to love our enemies. Now, love is not the Valentine's Day love. It's not the happy love feelings. That's not what Jesus said when he said for us to love our enemies. It is to remember the image that is stamped on us that we are lovable and that we are loved and that we are capable and, here's the hard part: the person that you disagree with is also stamped in God's image and also is loveable and capable (but sometimes struggles with how to show it or is so racked with fear that all you get is fight or flight). So, to counter fear, make an overt act of love by attempting to love your enemy. That may mean that this week if you hear somebody say something about voting for or against a Florida state amendment that you do not agree with, instead of trying to one-up them, or defeat them, sometimes loving our enemies is simply saying this: I hear what you're saying; I disagree, but I hear what you're saying and you have a right to say it. This overt act of love is about letting go and it's again one of the hardest things that we can do.

The last part of how love can be an antidote to fear; if you thought loving your enemy was hard; this last one is finding a time daily in your life to set aside all the worry and the fear of the 24-hour news cycle and all the simulation that we get from Caesar's world. Turn off all of that for a moment and intentionally go into the side of your brain that gives you inner wisdom and stillness. Overtly take time every day to turn off all the stimulation of Caesar's world and then to take time for inner wisdom and stillness to find the gentleness to find the peace that your brain can do. We are stamped to be able to do this. We have the image of God inside of us. That means we can spend time in inner wisdom and in stillness. Something unique and almost magical happens when we spend time in that part of our brain – our heart rate decreases, our stress level decreases and then it makes it easier to be overt about our love for somebody else. It makes it easier to listen to somebody go on and on and on about whatever political thing it is that they

believe and to be patient and to listen to them. If we have engaged in that inner wisdom and stillness, we can listen much longer and not engage to defeat them. And that the more that we spend time intentionally day by day with our inner wisdom and stillness, the easier it is to spend time in your day to do inner wisdom and stillness. That the more we do it, the easier it becomes. And then again, the lower our heart rate, the easier it is to tell others that you love them, and the easier it is to put up with a person that is tailgating you on Gulf of Mexico Drive. So, the more you can spend in that space, the better.

Jesus asked, *whose image is this*? He is still asking that question today. Are you stamped in Caesar's image? Are you responding to a world full of fear and anxiety with anxiety and fear? Or will you take a moment today, and every day this week, to remember that you are lovable and capable; to remember that you are stamped in God's image, and to spend time with your inner wisdom to bring about calm and peace and gentleness in your life.

Whose image is this?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.