

**Homily for June 20, 1999
12th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Cycle A**

By Father Charles Bowes

Jeremiah 20:10-13

Romans 5:12-15

Matthew 10:26-33

Fear of God is really love of God.

Just when school is out and we're settling into hopefully a peaceful summer, along comes Jesus in Matthew 10 talking about fear: "Don't be afraid of those who can only kill the body – they can't touch the soul," says Jesus. Instead, "be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body..."

In other words, Jesus is saying, "Fear God...God is the only one who can wipe out body and soul." Rather than leave us with that unsettling statement, Jesus is quick to add: "God, whose eye is on the sparrow, cares even more for you than for a flock of sparrows – he even counts the hairs on your head – so don't be afraid."

Now if that's not enough to cause confusion, I don't know what is. When in today's language we use the word "fear," we know what that means – bone chilling, teeth chattering, threat-of-death, instilling terror – that's fear...Is that how we are to relate to God?

Jesus is apparently recalling a theme deep in the Hebrew tradition, the intimate connection between fear of God and love of God. In the Hebrew tradition, fear means complete awe and reverence for the Creator,

such that one always acts out of profound respect for this maker, this rescuer, this sustainer and judge of all.

Well, we're apt to ask, "If fear of God has such a positive meaning, why then do we even use the word fear in speaking of God?"

Perhaps an example would help. Every parent wants to instill in a toddler a healthy fear of fire, deep water and automobile traffic. Not to respect the danger of such things is to be dangerously out of touch. This is not the harsh, terrifying fear that would keep the child from eventually learning to cook, to swim, and to drive a car. It is a healthy fear that instills the power of such things. Similarly, the Hebrew bible's fear of God is a deep sense of God's otherness and ultimacy, such that all of our actions are governed by our wonder and respect for this powerful other.

Perhaps another example would help still more – the fear we have of offending those we love the most. Are we not deeply pained when we discover that a word or an act of ours has hurt a parent, a child, or a good friend? And do we not fear offending them? That is the fear Jesus would have us feel toward the Father. When our love life is governed by this fear of God, we discover that we really have nothing to be afraid of at all.

It is that love which draws us to this holy table and to savor this fellowship – it is a fearful thing to

loose and something so great to treasure.

In a recent episode of the comic strip *Peanuts* Lucy is about to leave for school with her little brother Linus, but Linus is nowhere to be found. Lucy eventually finds Linus still in his room, hiding under his bed.

“I’m never going to school again,” Linus cries from under the bed. “The teacher asked me if I thought I’d learned everything I need to know. I think she was being sarcastic. Anyway, I said, ‘Yes.’ Now she’s mad at me.”

Lucy then asks, “Do you think you’ve learned everything you need to know?”

Linus responds, “I think I’ve learned all I need to know to live under a bed.”

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