

12 Ordinary A 2008

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Pope John Paul II's favorite phrase was "Be not afraid!" Do you know why he used it so often? It's because we are afraid, and we need someone to calm our fears and tell us not to worry. I'll confess to you one of my greatest fears. It is to walk into Mass and not have any ideas what I'm going to say for my homily; I have nightmares about that. And, by the way, that should be one of your greatest fears, too, because you don't know what might come out of my mouth, or how much might come out! You know, I sincerely wish that more priests had that same fear and would avoid giving unprepared homilies. Once, Bishop McDonald explained that giving a homily is like flying a plane. It's easy enough to take off and fly, but the hard part is landing. Have you ever heard a homily where you thought: "O.K., he's coming in for the landing and he'll be finished"? But then the priest got inspired and started on a whole new topic. They get close to landing only to take off again! But all priests should have a healthy fear of poorly prepared homilies. Why? Well, because you see, the flipside of fear is love: it's because priests love their people – and don't want to bore them to death – that we work on our homilies, and make them as good as we can. I fear to deliver a homily that's "shot from the hip" sort of say because I love you. Fear is the flipside of love.

Today Jesus is explaining fear in the gospel and what He says can sound rather confusing at first. Jesus says: "Do

not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.” What is the Lord talking about? He’s saying that we should not fear other people: those who can kill the body only. Instead we should fear God – He is the One who can destroy both body and soul in Gehenna. Now, Jesus is not saying that we should have a cringing, cowardly fear of God. Rather, we should remember that fear is the flipside of love. In other words, when you really love someone you fear to hurt them. Think about it: we fear to do or say anything that would offend our friends because we love them. That’s the kind of fear we should have of God: a fear motivated by love, a fear to do anything that would displease God. Just like I fear to give a homily “shot from the hip” because I love you, so we should fear to displease God by our sins because we love Him. Fear is always the flipside of love.

There’s an old joke about a man who’s walking along a cliff and slips off the side. As he’s falling he grabs hold of a branch sticking out of the side of the cliff. The poor man is hanging on for dear life and shouts out a heartfelt prayer. He says: “Dear God, if you’re really up in heaven, please save me!” Then miraculously a voice comes from the clouds and replies: “Yes, my son, I hear you and I will save you. Just let go of the branch and I will catch you.” The man looks down and sees he’s still very high off the ground, thinks for a moment and shouts again: “Is there anyone else up there who can save me?!” While the joke is funny it hides

a sad fact: the man had more fear of bodily death than he feared offending God by rejecting His offer of help. And if we probe the story a little further we find that it's really a lack of love. That is, the man has no fear of offending God because he really has very little love for God: we don't fear to offend those whom we really don't love. The flipside of fear is love: they are merely two sides of the same coin.

Folks, it's amazing what we do out of fear of others and what others may think of us. We buy certain clothes and shoes and cars because we want others to think highly of us. Young girls consent to sex with their boyfriends because they fear rejection by them. High school and college students drink alcohol and take drugs because they fear standing out and not being part of the crowd. We participate in racial jokes and bigotry because we seek approval of our peers. Pregnant girls choose abortion because they fear the reaction of their parents and friends. Priests preach a gospel devoid of the cross and hard teachings because we fear people will not like us, and no longer invite us over for supper or send us cheesecake. (That's my second greatest fear!) Parents miss Sunday Mass because they fear their children will not make a soccer game or a basketball tournament. In every one of these cases we fear those who can kill the body, we fear their rejection, but we have no fear of offending God, who can cast both body and soul into Gehenna. And if we probe our hearts a little further we might find that it's really a lack of love. We do not fear to offend God because we

really have little love for God. You see, the flipside of fear is love: they are merely the two sides of the same coin.

John Paul II often repeated the phrase "Be not afraid!" not because there's nothing to fear, but because we often fear the wrong things. May our greatest fear be hurting God in any way, especially through our sins. Why? Because our fear of God may be the best proof of our love for God. Okay, we just landed.

Praised be Jesus Christ!