

## Hospitality and Fear

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

October 20, 2019-AM Service

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Numbers 13:26-14:9

In the book, *The Art of Neighboring*, Jay Pathak tells a story about another one of his attempts to build social cohesion through hospitality in his new neighborhood. When he and his wife Danielle moved in, they thought they'd introduce themselves to their neighbors by sharing a pie. Jay's wife Danielle loved to bake and so sharing baked goods seemed like a good way to meet people. Most neighbors received their pie with thanks, but one neighbor had a very different reaction. When Danielle showed up with the pie, he wouldn't open the door to say hello. He cracked it open a sliver and told them to go away. "We just want to give you a pie." They said. "Go away," he said, "I don't want whatever you're selling." The man was suspicious and afraid. You know a society has reached high levels of fear when people feel threatened by a pie.

But that's what fear does. Fear makes people do funny things. Just look at what happens in our story. Israel is at the edge of the Promised Land. Finally, after all their travels they're ready to enter the land of Milk and Honey! In preparation for entry, they send a scouting party to check things out. The spies spend 40 days wandering around and what they see is beautiful. They come back with figs, pomegranates and a cluster of grapes so big that it takes two men to carry it! When they come back to the camp and Moses asks them what they saw, they show Moses their haul and they give a glowing report. "The land really does flow with milk and honey! Just like God said!" So far so good.

But then the fear starts. The scouts hadn't just found grapes, they'd seen people. Strong looking people. People living in cities. Cities with walls and fortifications. There are Amalekites on the plain, there are Hittites in the hills, and there Canaanites along the Jordan and by the sea. So many people. And the fear creeps in and starts to cloud their heart. Can we really occupy this land? I'm not sure this will work. Despite what they've seen, despite what they've been told, their fear begins to grow. One of the 12 scouts, Caleb, seems to sense the creeping fear and doubt and he says, "No guys, we should keep going ahead! We can certainly possess this land." The other spies hear Caleb's words, but they only feel their fear and now they start to act out of their fear, with destructive consequences.

First, they twist the truth. Verse 32 says they disseminated a bad report throughout the people. The Hebrew word for bad report is *dabbah*. It can also mean whispering gossip. I think it must be an example of onomatopoeia. The word sounds like what it means. It sounds like whispering gossip. *Dabbadabba*. The fearful spies go out among the people and they spread propaganda, "The land is bad! It devours those who live there!" This is a lie. You can imagine Joshua and Caleb saying, "The land is bad!? What are you talking about!? You just brought back a cluster of grapes so big it took two men to carry!" They also whispered "We saw the descendants of the Nephilim in the land!" Who are the Nephilim? Well lots of debate here, but according to Genesis 6 it seems like the Nephilim were a race of enormous warriors who were the offspring of heavenly beings—perhaps fallen angels—and human women. Whatever they were, Genesis says the flood swept them away, but you can imagine that the *idea* of the Nephilim still captured the people's imagination. Like comic book superheroes come to life! "Did you hear the spies saw the Nephilim!?" That rumor would have legs.

Second, the fear creates grumbling and division. "What?! We came all this way to fight with giants so that we can take possession of a land that devours its people!? No thank you. Our wives will die! Our children will die! Let's get rid of Moses! Let's find a new leader! Someone who will protect our children and take us back to Egypt!"

And finally the fear makes them want to abandon their mission and retreat into the past. In this case, they are even willing to go back to slavery. That's what fear does. When we are afraid, we retreat from the unknown and we plunk ourselves down in the known. When we are afraid we close the doors on future hopes and we hunker down in the familiar.

It's nasty stuff this fear. When we are afraid, it's like our life becomes a fertile field, but a field that's only fertile for the kind of things the evil one likes to grow. When we are afraid, all the evil one's best stuff grows in our field: lies, dissension, division, selfishness, violence, hopelessness, mistrust. They all flourish. What can't grow in our field are things like hospitality.

It's good that we think about fear and its dangers because we live in a society where fear is a growth industry. We live in a society where people try to grow fear in you so that they can sell you things and so they

can manipulate you. There's a commercial that I think many of you have seen. It's on heavy rotation. It's selling whooping cough vaccine. They want you to get vaccinated for whooping cough. The commercial opens with an attractive nice 60-year-old grandma sitting in her living room. She seems fine, but every once in a while she coughs. And when she coughs her head turns into the head of a big bad wolf. Then the camera flashes to a picture of her infant grandson being carried up the drive towards her home. Soon grandma picks up the baby, only now her coughing has permanently turned her head into wolf head! Now her big sharp teeth are only inches from her grandchild's sweet face. Uh-Oh, Better get vaccinated. The commercial plays on your fears. This sort of thing happens all the time. Watching this commercial once doesn't make us fearful people, but see a million of these messages over time, someone poking at your fears over and over again, it changes you.

Or consider the Lifetime Movie Network. Do you know the Lifetime Movie Network? If you have Xfinity in Grand Rapids, it's channel 221. I like to call the Lifetime Movie network 'the women in peril network' because every single movie on the network revolves around a woman who is going through her regular life only to find herself in mortal danger from a neighbor. Someone in her life that she thought was safe turns out to be a murderer, a stalker, a psycho. If you don't believe me, allow me to read the title of just some of the movies shown on Lifetime this past Thursday. The Stalker Club, Best Friend's Betrayal, The Wrong Friend, the Homekilling Queen, I Killed My BFF, Psycho BFF, and last but not least, I Killed My BFF: The Preacher's Daughter. It's ridiculous, but people watch these movies. What does it do to a person to when they hear story after story about people in their neighborhood, people next door, who look safe but who are actually dangerous predators? We are training our society to fear, and in this case we're training our society to fear our neighbors. It's fear porn.

And then there's politics. On both sides of the aisle, from all political perspectives, we are trained to fear. Over the next year you will see thousands of political ads. A few of those ads will offer a positive, hopeful vision based on policy. Most of those ads will begin with some terrifying vision of social disaster. 'Vote for my opponent and America will fall to ruin, Michigan will fall to ruin, Grand Rapids will fall into ruin.' Sowing fear is a huge part of politics these days. Now this is tricky, because there are things to be afraid of in this world. There are dangerous diseases that require vaccinations. And when people warned us about Adolf Hitler in the 1930's, they weren't fearmongering, they were telling the truth. There are real dangers in our world, so it's not like all fear is bad. But there is a difference between being a careful society and being a fearful society. When fear becomes our field, when fear becomes the story, something dark is happening. 10 of the spies are swept up in fear. 2 of them are not. Caleb and Joshua saw the same things as the other scouts. They saw the fortified cities. They saw the strong healthy people. So they know about the dangers. *But fear is not their story, fear is not their field.* But what does Caleb see? What is at his center? Caleb sees that God's promises are true! The land is flowing with Milk and Honey, just as He promised. Caleb sees that the Lord has already brought them all through many dangers, toils and snares. Caleb sees all the signs and wonders that God has performed along the way in the wilderness—a path through the Red Sea and manna every morning. Caleb see the Lord's love and care for His people—*He is with us!* He tells them in verse 9. He's with us. He's always been with us. He's taken care of us every step of the way, and He will take care of us going forward, so of course we should go into the land.

Caleb sees the danger, but danger is not his story. God's faithfulness is his story. Caleb has fears about the conquest of Canaan, but fear is not his story, God's faithfulness is his story. And that makes all the difference. When fear is our story, when fear is our field, our lives become small. We close ourselves off from the future, and we close ourselves off from our neighbor. When God's faithfulness is our story, when God's faithfulness is our field, our heart opens up and your life opens up. We're ready to risk things for God, we're ready to move towards strangers in love.

Paul describes the difference between the two mindsets pretty well in Romans 8:15. "*The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship (and daughtership). And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."* You are not slaves to fear. This is not a fear story. This is an Abba Father story and you are His beloved sons and daughters. That's what we try to proclaim to you every week here. You've been out in a world where people make movies like Psycho Bff. You've been out in a world where violence exists and people we love get sick and die. But in here we tell you that you are not in a fear story you are in an Abba, Father story. And the Father has sent his son to love you, to save you and to make all things new. We sing that story in our songs. I proclaim it in my sermons. The

windows tell that story with color and light. We hope that after an hour here, you will be ready to go out into the world to love your neighbor, prepared and careful, but not afraid.

In her neighborhood in Durham North Carolina, Rosaria Butterfield practices radically ordinary hospitality. Every week she and few other neighbors put together a kind of neighborhood potluck under their carport. They bake bread, make chili, buy fruit and they lay it out for the people on the street. Over the years, neighbors have come, friendships have been made, prayers have been said and lives have been changed. In 2014 a man named Hank moved into their neighborhood. Hank was a recluse, he disconnected his doorbell because he didn't like people ringing it. In the summer, he let his lawn grow wild. Hank would sometimes get into angry phone conversations where he would scream obscenities into his cell phone. Hank had a pit bull named Tank who would run around the neighborhood unsupervised. Neighbors were afraid of Hank. Most avoided him. But not Rosaria. She never gave up on him. She kept reaching out and inviting him to their gatherings and praying for him. One day Tank the pit-bull got lost. He ran off and no one could find him. Concerned, Hank the recluse left the house and began looking for his dog. Rosaria and her kids loved dogs, so they joined their coarse neighbor in his search. They posted notices and they searched high and low. When Tank was found, a friendship was forged and Hank began to be welcomed into the neighborhood. People found out more about him, about his PTSD and his depression, and that gave them context. Hank began helping in the neighborhood, chopping wood and lending tools.

If only that were the end of the story. In 2016 the DEA showed up at Hank's house. They arrested Hank and took him away. He had been running a meth house in the neighborhood, right near their children. Hank was sentenced to 10 years in a federal prison. He was a dangerous man all along. So was fear the right story then? Is this a kind of cautionary tale where you can say, see! I told you! You can't trust these weird strangers! Is this a real-life Lifetime Movie network story: My Psycho Meth Neighbor? Nope. The neighborhood did not give up on Hank. They kept contact. They kept praying. Rosaria's husband visits Hank regularly. Hank detoxed from the meth and now he really, really wants to get to know Jesus. He really wants to understand the source of the love that he got from his neighbors. And every day he prays for the neighbors on his old street. It's not a fear story. It's an Abba Father story. It's a Jesus story. It's a love story and it will never end.

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