

FEAR AND VIOLENCE

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SESSION I

INTRODUCTION

In one week in January, 2015, there were news stories about three terrorists motivated by religious fundamentalism killing several staffers of a magazine in France, a deranged father throwing his child off a bridge to her death as horrified police tried in vain to stop him, an elderly man in a nursing home dying after a police officer shot him five times with beanbags because he would not put down a shoehorn he was brandishing, and a mother shot to death in a grocery store when he toddler reached into her purse and fired a loaded pistol she carried routinely in public. The stories vary greatly in terms of their circumstances and causes, but they share at least one characteristic in common: one or more lives came to a violent end.

We in the faith communities have a duty to proactively respond in efforts to diminish this violence. Particularly we who are Christian are called by one we call “the Prince of Peace” to be peace-makers. This duty involves, among other things, efforts to implement and support legal efforts to regulate the responsible use of guns. We need, though, to keep in mind that laws do not change one’s heart and mind. Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed out that “laws will not make another person love me as a brother, but they may keep him from beating me to death.” Laws have real value and we need to support them. However, our primary faith duty is to focus on the spiritual level of living, for this is what will bring real and deep change to people.

Our primary spiritual task in dealing with destructive behaviors relates to identifying and dealing with the dynamics that underlie those behaviors. In the medical world, a primary duty is to treat the underlying disease that precipitates symptoms. Using this model, we would identify abnormal fear as a disease that is revealed in violent behaviors in which various tools such as guns are used. The primary spiritual task is to focus on the disease. This does not imply that we ignore the behavioral level or the tools used in those behaviors. We need to deal with the behavioral level and tools used in those behaviors. We also need to respond to those dynamics in our culture that exalt and praise violence in many parts of business, entertainment and other aspects of living. However, in this segment of dealing with violence we will focus on fear. Our goal will be to consider how to identify and support the creative potential of fear and diminish its destructive dynamics. In addition, Christianity has a number of important statements to this end, which we must examine.

Fear: A significant driving factor in violence

Fear is a significant factor in all acts of violence – but it is not the only factor nor does it always erupt in violence. Fear can be destructive – but it can under some circumstances be helpful. In fact, fear is important to our survival; it warns us of danger and prompts us to act.

As we begin our consideration of fear it is well to think about how we use the term. In general, we use several words as being alike in meaning: fright, scared and afraid. We tend to think of them as being interchangeable. We are afraid or scared of any number of threatening things such as being attacked by a wild animal. Fright is more commonly used in reference to things that startle us. Fear, as used here, refers to a primordial, underlying dynamic emotion that is induced by a perceived threat.

An interesting sidelight relates to the use of fear in the Bible. In the more archaic understanding “fear of the Lord” was and is perceived as being afraid of doing something to offend God who will then punish us. But in many biblical passages fear is used in the sense of reverential awe, i.e. to honor and respect. The Psalmist says that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Proverbs 19:23 tells us that “The fear of the Lord is life indeed.” Fear in this sense is one of the most positive attitudes possible, a requisite to healthy spiritual living.

Fear is an emotion innate to all living beings. It is a “natural” dynamic that arises from the perception of danger. In the human family it begins at birth. Prior to birth we are in a protected environment in which we only receive with no demands or responsibilities imposed upon us. In the process of birth we are thrust into an environment that imposes perceived threat which evokes a drive to survive. We experience the pain of separation and physical discomfort and we have no sense of anyone or anything other than ourselves and our stress. We experience being alone and at the mercy of a threatening environment. This instills a basic life stance that might be called *cosmic paranoia*.

Paranoia is an “idea of reference.” This is a point of view based on a judgment that everything that happens refers specifically to the person of reference. In popular usage we think of paranoia in its negative sense that people or situations are plotting harm for us, but it can also involve thoughts that people and situations specifically refer to us in positive ways. Attaching *cosmic* to paranoia adds a sense that the whole universe is involved in reference to us and our status. Cosmic paranoia at birth addresses our birth orientation with a sense that we are all that is and all that happens relates to us, period. We are the center and essence of all being. We are “god,” “the Master of our Fate, the Captain of our Soul”.

The negative components of cosmic paranoia are the nearest that I can come to speaking of “original sin.” It is an “original” life stance that never totally leaves us throughout our life. This concept was first alluded to in the second century by an early bishop, Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons. Augustine, the bishop of Hippo, further developed it in the 5th century. Article 7 of the United Methodist Church’s Articles of Religion says “Original sin ... is the corruption of the nature of every man that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually.”

As we consider sin, please think in other than the traditional distorted definition of sin which focuses on the judgmental terms of one’s being morally good or bad. Think of sin in terms of dynamics that are

destructive of life and separation from the very essence of our being. It is more than something one does; it reaches more deeply into what one is.

Hopefully, as we grow we come to realize that there are beings other than us and that we are not the focus of all that happens. We come to understand that we are part of a world that contains benevolence – which includes benevolent beings that assist our being. This is probably the nearest that we can come to a realistic understanding of God, i.e. the essence of our being. Ideally our mother is the first image of God for us, but as we grow older, we understand that God is greater than any person or anything else in the universe, greater than anything we can imagine.

Paul Tillich referred to God as the Ground of Being. In this view God is not a being. Beings are finite. Being itself – God – is infinite and is the essence of all being. Faith communities should present messages that help us understand and incorporate the benevolence that we call God into our personal world and being. As we incorporate this divine benevolence into our being we become aware that we are not alone, that we are not the center of being and that all is not hostile to us. Even though we are not God – i.e. the ground and center of being – we are part of God.

Sin is a state of being separated from God, i.e. alienated from the reality of life, even though God is the very origin and basis of our being. Though we live in God, we try to become our own “god” and wind up living in various states of fear that can be very destructive of ourselves and others. It is important to keep in mind that this is part of all of us and not just the “bad guys” who do things that shock us. As Paul says “All have sinned and fallen short of His glory.”

Another aspect of our condition is the corporate nature of sin. We live in a good world, God’s world, yet society is in many ways fallen away from God. Economic injustices, racial and class prejudices, and the greed which leads to war are only some examples of the larger aspect of corporate sin. In addition, the news every day provides fresh examples of how even religious intolerance can lead to violence and alienation. In all of these cases, fear plays a foundational role.

Nonetheless, fear is an essential part of all living. At times it is even our friend. It is important to keep in mind that even in very healthy persons there remain elements of that original fear of being alone in a threatening environment. Our cosmic paranoia fear shows up particularly during times when we experience stress in life. It is a friend, though, at those times when genuine threats confront us. Let us now think about the fears we face.

Fears may be divided into two groups: Environmental fears and Psychological fears.

Environmental fears are realistic, i.e. related to a concrete, dangerous situation. These fears are our friends that call for a creative response to danger. They are helpful in preventing injury and death.

Psychological fears relate to internal dynamics that are not supported by external events or settings.

These fears tend to short-circuit our thinking and civilized moral responses. They tend to ignite emotional reactions rather than thoughtful responses and often erupt in violent behaviors.

Let us look at some of the basic fears of life and how they are realistic (environmental) fears or internal (psychological) fears. Think of terms of how they are creative or destructive of living. As we look at these “basic fears” let’s think of them in terms of how they assist or hinder living and growing on personal as well as social levels. In this way we avoid a tendency to descend into judgmental stances of “good” and “bad” which are very subjective and related to one’s own unique life presuppositions. Keep in mind that what is good for you may be bad for me. Now let’s look at some of the basic fears of life. As we consider them it is best to evaluate them in terms of how they enhance or diminish living.

(“Basic Fears” handout is presented to participants.)

- **Fear of extinction:** This is the primary existential anxiety in all normal human beings. It involves a sense that our very being could be eliminated and we would no longer exist.
- **Fear of mutilation:** This relates to having one’s bodily structure violated, i.e. having one’s body damaged, invaded or destroyed. It often focuses on possible attacks by dangerous animals or humans.
- **Fear of losing one’s autonomy:** This involves anxiety about becoming immobilized, paralyzed, entrapped or imprisoned. It relates to a sense of becoming controlled or overwhelmed by external circumstances and may be physical or social.
- **Fear of separation from others:** This relates to a sense of rejection, abandonment and loss of connection with others. In this one has a sense of not being valued by others and in essence becoming a non-person.
- **Fear of ego death:** This carries with it a sense of humiliation and shame resulting in a profound sense of self-disapproval. It includes a sense of one not being loveable or capable of worth. Religious bigotry and intolerance often express the fear of ego-death on a cosmic level.
- **Fear of powerlessness:** This relates to a sense of one’s inability to meet demands or expectations that one perceives others to want. It carries with it a sense of lacking the tools or resources to meet situations one faces. It can result in one grasping and utilizing what are perceived as more powerful tools to meet the situation, e.g. guns.
- **Fear of the unknown:** Life is never totally predictable. Healthy life may not be predictable but it is trustworthy because we know we are in God’s hands. Unhealthy life may be more predictable, but it can be destructive because we keep making the same mistakes again and again.

These fears are all innate to life and can be defined as natural. They all have creative and destructive potential depending on how one responds to them. Creative responses assist and enhance living for the person and those around her/him. Destructive responses prompt withdrawal from living or various forms of violence toward oneself and others.

DISCUSSION:

- 1. As you look at this list of fears, which do you think is obviously visible in our society today?*
- 2. In what way are these fears creative or positive?*
- 3. In what way are they destructive?*
- 4. Matthew 10:32 says that “perfect love casts out fear;” what does this mean?*
- 5. What are some ways we can teach our children and youth to overcome destructive fears?*

SESSION II
HUMAN FUNCTIONING: OUR PROCESS
FOR RESPONDING TO EVENTS

(“Human Functioning Process” handout is presented.)

We meet life via a process that begins with events that we filter through our basic life presuppositions and functional dynamics. Our presuppositions evaluate these events and assign a personal meaning for them. This established meaning prompts emotional responses, i.e. feelings. These feelings ignite our thinking process to determine behaviors which deal with the event in a manner that we consider to best assist our well-being.

Basic life presuppositions

From the beginning in our life we begin processing what happens to us. This includes the various events that occur in our living and training. We are born with some personality predispositions that modify how we integrate learning from these events and teachings. From this learning we develop principles upon which we establish ideas of meaning about future events. These meanings vary from being quite conscious to being deeply unconscious. Often these perceptions occur very rapidly with little, if any, conscious thinking involved. They are quite automatic and ignite feelings before one is fully aware of what is happening. To understand this, think about someone coming up and slapping you in the face. You have an immediate emotional reaction. In normal settings you do not hold off your emotions and think a bit about what it means and then decide how to feel about it. Your basic life learning has already established meaning for this happening and you have an immediate emotional/feeling reaction.

Feelings: Emotional, affective responses to fear.

It is important to be clear about these things we call feelings. So let us strive to identify the dynamics of this term. From this we can understand more about how they impact our being and how to creatively deal with them. The first thing to say about feelings is that they are affective, i.e. emotional, responses that are part of our very being. True feelings are emotional responses such as happiness, love, fright and anger. They are windows into our soul telling us what is going on inside of us. Psychotherapy begins with looking into the feelings behind our behaviors.

Several rules apply to the true definition of feelings:

- Feelings are neither good nor bad. They just are.
- Feelings are our own and it cannot be said that we do not feel what we feel
- Feelings are not subject to being challenged as wrong.
- Feelings are not controllable.
 - They happen to us before we are aware of them.
 - We only control what we do with them.

The term “feelings” can be used in a number of ways, not all of them helpful. In one common misuse of the term we sometimes employ it in an attempt to avoid being challenged for ideas and attitudes that we erroneously call feelings. Additionally, it may imply that we can’t help doing what we do. This can be a not-so-subtle attempt to avoid responsibility for ideas and attitudes that we often have. In addition to avoiding responsibility, we may be intimating that we are unable to change those things that we call feelings. It is like having a free card to get out of jail. Let’s look at how we use the term, feelings, to address our speculations, life presuppositions and desires which are always subject to challenge as being in error.

(“Feelings” handout is presented.)

At this point we will look at and discuss our use of the term “feelings” and how to be more able to more accurately identify and talk about feelings.

Thinking evaluative responses

Suppose an event has occurred and been evaluated through our presuppositions and have evoked our affective responses (feelings). Now comes the time to consider a response to the event. This calls for thinking to evaluate what happened and consider what to do next. Ideally, we would consider the dynamics of what has happened, review possible actions for response, consider the potential results those actions and make a decision about what is the most creative and appropriate action for this occasion. Sometimes this can happen quickly. Other times it takes considerable time to complete the process. Unfortunately, our feelings can take over and short-circuit the process. We often react to our feelings so rapidly that we don’t fully consider possible creative responses to what has happened. This often results in destructive behavior.

Behaviors

Behaviors are our action responses in life. This is where “the rubber hits the road” in response to what has impacted us. When we experience fearful feelings we respond in actions that strive to protect us from the perceived danger. This tends to inspire what is identified as a “Fight or Flight” response. Fight involves behaviors that approach the source of danger. Flight involves behaviors that strive to retreat from the source of danger. Any given situation can inspire either fight or flight.

One’s response to a perceived danger varies in intensity with one’s understanding of the force of the danger and one’s general stance in meeting life. A heightened sense of danger prompts heightened affective responses which tend to overwhelm one’s thinking ability. People who have a more aggressive life stance tend to confront the perceived source of danger. This approach does not necessarily involve attempts to attack and destroy the source of danger. The Gospel injunction to “turn the other cheek” confronts the danger without taking flight or fighting. People who have a more passive life stance tend to withdraw from the perceived source of danger. Fight and flight can each be creative or destructive. In the loftier spiritual/religious communities the primary goal in life is to be as creative with as little

destruction as possible. It would be good if we could be fully creative without any destruction involved. Of course, life is not always so simple and clear-cut as to make that possible in all situations.

A major goal in most Christian faith communities is to help develop skills to slow down emotional responses to perceived danger, instead training persons to develop a pattern of overriding the emotional reaction control and interjecting time for thinking before acting. An example of this skill is to be seen in a fellow who bought a new Cadillac convertible which had been his dream for years. As he drove into his driveway, he cut the corner too short and wound up with the rear fender crushed by a large rock the he installed to keep people off his grass. He spoke of how he had trained himself to always ask first, "What can I learn from this event." In our political culture we encourage our leaders to stop, think and utilize peace-making efforts instead of automatically reacting to perceived threats by making war or retreating to appeasement. Attack and withdrawal are not the only means for dealing with perceived danger.

DISCUSSION:

Consider some scenarios of threat and fight or flight responses. Examples:

- 1. You are in a convenience store when the sound of gunfire at the check-out is heard;*
- 2. You are in a fender-bender and the other driver comes toward you with a ball-bat in hand;*
- 3. On a less threatening level, you are approached by a panhandler in the church parking lot who keeps pressing you for a donation, demanding more than you offer and asking if you are a Christian.*
- 4. Would your answers to any of these questions be different if you were accompanied by a child or by a dependent older person? How?*

SESSION III HELPING PEOPLE DEAL WITH FEAR

To work at changing our responses to fear it is important to look clearly at the behavioral responses of our fearful feelings. There is a strong tendency to respond defensively to our behaviors – even denying them – rather than facing and acknowledging them. Defensive reactions involve efforts to justify what we have done. Creative responses involve understanding the basis of our responses. To do this, we must clearly face our behaviors and acknowledge them. This is the real essence of confession, which is an integral part of Christian worship. Confession is not a matter wallowing in guilt. It clearly acknowledges, “This is what I did.” Guilt can be helpful in prompting us to face our behaviors, but it does not help us to creatively learn from our behaviors.

In working to understand our responses to fear there are three points for focus:

- Behaviors
- Feelings
- Life suppositions which are often quite unconscious to the person

The process of helping create positive change works backward from identifying behaviors to identifying the feelings that prompt the behaviors. This then helps the person identify and understand the life underlying presuppositions that set the stage for reaction. At this point a person can make decisions about changing or keeping these life presuppositions. Understanding and changing one’s life presuppositions will work toward changing our affective responses to life situations. This results in different affective (feeling) responses which then move us toward healthier, more creative behavior. The ultimate focus in helping people to be creative rather than destructive in life is to change their basic presuppositions.

As we work toward more creative responses to fear, there are a number of approaches that we can use with ourselves or with others in dealing with the fears that we face in life. While these are techniques used in therapy, they are not exclusive to the therapeutic realm. When fears reach the level of pathology that disrupts life, people need to see well-skilled therapists. However, in our lives there are levels of fear that we as individuals and the Christian community can utilize to help ourselves and others to live more creative lives. In essence, they are good practices to develop friendship and community support. In 1986 one therapist, William Schofield, wrote a book that he titled Psychotherapy, the Purchase of Friendship in which he posited the idea that psychotherapy involves dynamics of friendship. Friends are important factors in keeping us sane. Our faith does not call all of us to become therapists, but it does call us all to be friendly and therapeutic in our relationships.

Let us consider some of the ways to help people develop more creative life presuppositions and behaviors. There are a number of relational approaches to utilize:

- Strive to understand the person and what that person is doing and feeling.

- Keep in mind that it is more important to be with the person than to do something. Sometimes it is more helpful to “Don’t just do something, stand there.”
- Help the person tap into their own creative potential for evaluating the situation and developing more viable responses. You will be asked for advice and will be tempted to give it. This can develop dependence on you and short-circuit the person’s present and future learning. The goal is to help people arrive at their own creative conclusion rather than ours. In this, people do not have to remember what they were told because their conclusions are part of them.
- Keep in mind that the person is responsible for his/her own conclusions. You are not responsible for his/her conclusions. Giving advice tends to keep you responsible for what a person does in response to your advice.
- In working to understand the person ask “what” and “how” questions rather than “why” questions. “Why” questions ask for a rational justification of one’s actions. “How” and “what” get to the realm of data about what happened and how the person reacted. The goal is to help people call forth their inner wisdom and inspire them to use that wisdom in creative responses rather falling prey to destructive reactions. This requires us to believe that people can solve their own problems.
- Of course, for Christians, we believe we have some powerful tools to help us in this task: faith and prayer, the wisdom of Scripture, the strengthening that comes from being part of a redemptive community, and – above all – the power of God’s Holy Spirit in our lives.

When working with others, our responses need to be creative, supportive and realistically evaluative of the situation. The goal is to inspire the person to use her/his rational and environmental resources to evaluate and deal with the situation. The intent is to help the person learn from the event rather than just reacting on an emotional level.

DISCUSSION:

- 1. Do you think that many people feel that they can turn to the Church for help with their fears? Why or why not?*
- 2. In what way does your faith enable you to help others?*
- 3. Why is confidentiality important in helping others?*
- 4. How can faith communities help people feel that they are not alone and at the mercy of a hostile environment?*

SESSION IV

The community of faith has many powerful messages that can be proclaimed to assist this process. This is not an exhaustive list but it addresses significant messages:

- You are not alone.
- You are loved.
- You do not have to be perfect to be of worth.
- Forgiveness is always available to you.
- Redemption is always possible.
- This life is valuable and dear.

These messages are – or ought to be – reinforced by the churches regularly, not least in the corporate worship of the church. Acts of praise, confession and assurance of forgiveness, and commitment all remind us of the eternal worth of each soul. Add to this the expressions of genuine fellowship that are available in the many activities of the church, and we realize the power that communities of faith offer.

John Wesley maintained that “Solitary religion is the Devil’s religion.” By that he did not mean that private prayer and Bible study are useless, but that we have a need for the community of faith that can be met in no other way. Of course, we also ought to remember theologian Karl Barth’s comment that while many people are met by God in the church, many others make their last stand against God in the church. That is, some folks substitute busyness and good deeds for a genuine openness to the Divine.

Our task as persons of faith is to make these messages an integral part of our being and acting, just as the congregation is embody them. Our first task is to hear the fears of people. Until we truly hear them we do not have any basis for pronouncing judgments about their presuppositions or behaviors. Even then, any judgments that we make should be about the viability or destructive potential inherent in the presuppositions and behaviors.

Unfortunately, there are faith community messages that counter these messages and serve to increase fear in people. These messages have a long history that even predates Christian scriptures. They are messages that are designed to control people.

Fear is a very effective tool in controlling people’s behaviors. Consider a very common example of a child running out toward a dangerous street. We yell at the child in effort to stop her/him from getting into that danger. In essence, we are hoping to “freeze them in place.” In faith communities we often hear similar control messages intended to prevent what are considered to be destructive lifestyles. Often these messages only serve to enhance one’s sense of fear and sense of inadequacy to meet life’s experiences. Examples of these messages include:

- You are basically sinners and evil in nature. We earlier noted Paul's comment that "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," which is a fact of life, but even more the Church, and we as Christians, should lift the message that every person is a precious child of God.
- God is a harsh judge who will cause bad things to happen to you in life when you do wrong. There are indeed passages in both the Old and New Testaments in which God is depicted in exactly those terms, just as there are passages such as those in the Books of Job and Jonah which offer exactly the opposite picture of the Divine nature. But most of all we need to point out that the whole purpose of Christ's coming was to redeem the world, not condemn it.
- God will punish you with an afterlife of hell if you don't behave properly. Of course, there are many passages in Scripture which speak of the eternal consequences of intentionally remaining alienated from God. Even Jesus warned of this. And we each could speak of examples of people we know who are living in their own special Hell in this, sometimes imposed on them and sometimes the consequences of their own choices and actions. But the good news of the Gospel is that God loves us as children even though we may have strayed. It's important for the Church – and for us – to be more concerned to love a bit of Heaven into them rather than scare the Hell out of them.

Sin is a biblical concept that has been misused and severely harmed in a lot of our faith community proclamations. In reaction to this misuse, some faith communities have worked to avoid talking about sin – which is not a panacea but another problem of its own. If we truly want to help people develop more creative and less fearful life stances, we need to develop a better understanding of the concept that we call sin. Sin should be considered in terms of destructive dynamics which have implications within and beyond this specific time and space. Alienation from God – which brings alienation from others and from our own best selves – has long-term consequences in our own life and the life of others. This is often described as "seeing the larger picture." In our faith teachings we must try to help people view more cosmic implications of what they do without debasing their sense of their own value – and the value of others. A healthy concept of sin can assist this. Our primary faith goal needs to be focused on helping people live the abundant life.

It is an easier task to threaten people with cosmic punishment in hope that this will control them to behave in ways that we consider to be better living. Unfortunately, for some this seems to be the only formula that works. However, for others this message only enhances their fears and results in a diminished sense of competence to meet the difficulties of life. As Paul addressed in his letter to the Roman Christians, law only defines spiritual death; it doesn't bring to us the life that is life indeed.

We need to be concerned about preventing spiritual death. More than that, though, we need to work to enhance life. It is easy to define that which causes death of the human spirit. The real work of faith relates to helping facilitate life. There are a number of Biblical teachings that focus on building a viable response to life:

- I came so that they could have life – indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest. (John 10:10 Common English Version)
- He has told you, human one, what is good and what the Lord requires from you: to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with God. (Micah 6:8 CEV)
- I am convinced that nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus our Lord; not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created. (Romans 8:38-39 CEV)
- Don’t be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God’s will is – what is good and pleasing and mature. (Romans 12:2 CEV)
- You must forgive, even as you have been forgiven.

This challenge to forgive is an important one. It has been said that bitterness is an acid which causes more damage to the vessel in which it is stored than to the object over which it is poured. Forgiveness toward others is an absolute necessity if we are to avoid being eaten by resentment and fear. Forgiveness is also the first step toward possibly restoring a broken relationship.

The problem – as most of us know from personal experience – often lies in the difficulty of accepting forgiveness. And some of us are willing to believe that God forgives us, and even can accept forgiveness from one we have wronged, but we find it almost impossible to forgive ourselves. Yet until we are able – by the grace of God – to do that, we find ourselves trapped in remorse and alienation.

DISCUSSION:

1. *How have you experienced forgiveness in your life?*
2. *How do you perceive forgiveness being offered in your church?*
3. *Do you think others believe the church is a forgiving fellowship? Why or why not?*

Conclusion

Paul Tillich wrote a book entitled *The Courage to Be*, in which he posited that living always has threat. He spoke of death as the only way to remove threat. Living is like moving against a black wall which hides what lies ahead. To live we must move forward and push the wall back, realizing that it is always possible that there is an abyss into which we might fall. The only way to avoid the abyss is to remain in place. This is the real essence of spiritual death. To truly live is to move forward, pushing the wall back. This requires courage, “The Courage to Be.” That is the real essence of faith.

Note that for Tillich faith is not simply assent to a set of doctrines but a basic attitude of trust – which for him was a trust in God. This is the only thing that can give us courage to push forward into the future with confidence and courage. Christians see the example of this faith in Jesus Christ, and believe that the essence of faith is to follow him, not simply repeat a Creed in church.

Our tendency is to ask, “Be what?” To consider what truly being is we might recall Moses’ question at the burning bush in which he asked what he was to say to the Pharaoh about who sent him to take the Israelites out of Egypt. The answer was “I Am Who I Am. So say to the Israelites, ‘I Am has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3:14 CEB) To **BE** is rather like that. Further definition only diminishes the essence of being. God is greater than the human mind can understand. In somewhat the same way it is difficult to say exactly what we must do and be, since we are made in the image of God, and we each face a different set of circumstances in life. But God has placed within each of us an innate sense of what it means to be an authentic person, characterized by honesty, humility and honor.

When I was pastor in one of my early churches, my wife and I regularly met with two other young couples to socialize. We fellows were in the kitchen playing cards while the women were in the living room. The women got onto the subject of sex appeal and one of them commented, “I don’t know how to define it, but I know it when I see it!”

Being is like that. There is something inside us that knows what it means to **BE** when we see it. To **BE** requires courage – which is not found in the ability to wreak violence on others or to swagger in macho bravado. It takes true courage to care, to forgive, and to witness to a higher way of living. It’s found in the classic formulation: Faith, Hope, and Love.

DISCUSSION:

- 1. What gets in the way of authentic living?***
- 2. How may we grow into authentic living?***
- 3. What resources are offered by religion to help us grow in authentic living?***