

Sermon by The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori, Emmaus Celebration
Eucharist October 26, 2008

I spent several hours on the way here stuffed in a tiny commercial airplane. The person in the next seat was so big that she didn't fit into her own seat, but overflowed into mine. Every time she moved, I did too, whether I was ready or not. It was so constricting that I found it hard to relax enough to really think. Most of us experience physical confinement or the intense proximity of strangers as limiting our freedom rather than expanding it. The act of will that's necessary to enter a different psychic space is so immense that most of us get a little crazy instead. It happens to prisoners of war and prisoners of law, and it happens to us when we become prisoners of scarcity. I was wrestling with scarce physical space, but the more destructive prisons have to do with insufficiencies of daily life – like food, shelter, education, and employment. Lots of people in this country and around the world are experiencing the prison of fear about their financial future. Any prison, physical, psychological, or spiritual, can take away the fullness of life for which we were created. The gospel is about opening those prisons and setting the captives free.

Ezekiel uses a remarkably literal image when he talks to his people and tells them they need a heart transplant: "Your atherosclerotic, diseased, calcified heart is killing you, but God's going to take that one out and give you one that will bring greater life." Maybe Ezekiel had seen the corpse of someone who'd died of heart disease, but I doubt it. He was prescient, however. The kind of heart disease that kills most of us who eat too much and exercise too little can almost literally turn our arteries to stone. Those plaques get hardened with calcium, and sometimes the whole heart can be sheathed in calcium, almost like a marble. That heart and its arteries can't move enough to pump fresh blood and let it flow through the body. There's no flexibility or vigor left. And sometimes the only solution is a heart transplant. Ezekiel is talking about spiritual death of the nation's heart, and it mostly has to do with possessiveness, what we would call consumerism or affluenza. It becomes a problem when the nation no longer has an ability to notice the poor on its doorstep and in its backyard, when there's no flexibility or willingness to share, whether it's space or food or access to political power. That possessiveness actually builds a prison around us.

Getting a new heart and a new spirit has to do with the ability to be vulnerable, to get out of our own way, to give up being the center of the universe. It also has to do with letting go of the stony non-responsiveness called fear, fear that constricts

and paralyzes. Even at a basic biological level, being startled or scared out of your wits raises your blood pressure, makes your heart beat a lot faster, and shifts your blood circulation from digestive organs to the big muscles that will help you run away or fight off your attacker. There is very little flexibility in the response, and once it's started, it's hard to willfully shut it down.

That's what's going on with James and John in the gospel. They're waking up to the fact that Jesus isn't going to be around forever, and they're starting to get scared. They want to ensure their retirement benefits while he's still around. Jesus tells them to hang loose, that he's not going to fix it all in stone, and if they want good seats they'd be better off making sure that other people get their seats first. Their security will lie in letting go of their feelings of entitlement and turning to help others find their seats.

We live in a very anxious world right now. The fear level has been intentionally ratcheted up by things like the TSA announcements at the airport: "orange threat level, keep your eyes on your bags and don't leave them alone or we'll have to blow them up for you just to make sure they're not a threat." Other parts of the world have lived with terrorism for a lot longer than we have, and they are far less excited by it. It is possible to learn to live with less fear.

But the level of fear also gets ratcheted up by things that seem accidental, like the stock market collapse or the way oil prices went through the roof several months ago. The ultimate source of that fear is the same – that somebody else will take over or take away stuff that's mine, or all mine. It is related to believing that there isn't enough safety, or profit, or space for me to live my life as I want to.

So what do we do with that fear response, once it's started? It is possible to look for the causes of it, and when we understand why hearts are racing, we can begin to slow them down. I finally got comfortable in that tiny seat when I let go of feeling pushed around. A good thing, because the next flight had an even bigger guy in the next seat who kept nodding off and falling over on me! Practice does make it easier, even for us slow learners.

Think about the basic and unchanging message of God's messengers – those angels who startle people by saying, "fear not." Consider Jesus himself, who reminds us that "perfect love casts out fear." And the prophets continue to remind us that all of us can live in peace and harmony – without fear – when we spread the goodies around so that nobody goes hungry. Then wars end because people no longer have any reason to be afraid.

Think about how this is being played out in our political process right now. How much of the advertising and commentary is directed at human fear, and often in a way that panders to the worst of human prejudice? One candidate is suspected of being a Muslim – and the unspoken implication is that he's the next thing to a terrorist. The other candidate is accused of being dishonest about his medical condition – and the unspoken implication is that he will abandon the nation at a moment of great need. There is a profound opportunity for the gospel in this election – to set us free from fear. When we're afraid we cannot make entirely rational responses, only base and basic self-protective ones. Jesus' urging is that we let go of those self-protective stances and remember that God's love is bigger than any of our paltry fears. We will all be saved when each one is, and we cannot save ourselves alone – either by our own efforts or only as individuals.

This diocese is celebrating the end of one era and the beginning of a new one. You've done great work in equipping the saints around here to share that good news. The Emmaus story, for which this era just past is named, is about recognizing the presence of God in our midst, even when we're exhausted and full of fear. I don't know what you're going to call the next chapter in the Diocese of West Missouri, but it will continue to carry something of that Emmaus spirit – fear not, for God is with us, and we will discover Jesus with us when we break bread with the poor and fearful.

Letting go of fear takes only a small shift in awareness. Dick and I were riding up the elevator in our hotel this morning, when a fellow got on. He saw another guy in the back with a box, and he said, "Oh, donuts! Mmmm. But I can't steal one, because there's a person of the cloth in here." So I piped up and said, "But he could share." Indeed, sharing would change the climate of worry and fear. Welcome to the banquet, prepared from the foundation of the world, for those who will live in community, in the eternal presence of God. Welcome to the banquet!