

FEAR AND COURAGE:

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Is it wrong to be afraid? The medieval Christian philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas helpfully distinguished between fear as an *emotion* and fear as a *way of living*.

The emotion of fear, Aquinas argued, is a good part of being human. We humans are natural and inescapable lovers: when we perceive something threatening those whom we love — including ourselves — we naturally are afraid. If our love is healthy, then our fear is also healthy. That sort of healthy fear is not a sin. Rather, it's a sign of love.

Everything hinges, Aquinas says, on what we do with that fear.

On one hand, we can fear too little, because we love too little. Aquinas criticizes those who run recklessly into the face of danger without any regard for themselves. To love ourselves and others as we ought, means paying attention to our fear when danger threatens. To act in the face of COVID-19 as if we had nothing to fear — by crowding nightclubs or churches in violation of local public health directives — is at root a failure of love, for ourselves and those who are most vulnerable.

On the other hand, fear can turn us inward, suffocating our loves and, in the process, ourselves. Fear as a *way of living* stifles us and locks us into a prison of self-protection. We jealously protect our own safety and the safety of those closest to us. We hoard resources, from hand sanitizer to unproven but potentially therapeutic medications. We abandon those outside of our close circles, who are vulnerable and who are different from us, as “not our concern.”

Both of these ways of living — reckless disregard and stifling self-protection — are not centrally problems of fear. They are problems of love. Fearing well in the time of COVID-19 requires that we love well.

To love well in the face of fear, Aquinas says, is to be courageous. To be courageous is not to run headlong into the face of danger with no regard for the consequences, nor to deny or dismiss fear. Courage is not the opposite of fear. Rather, to be courageous is to rightly appraise danger and feel the weight of fear, and yet, even so, to stand firm and do what love requires.

As I write this, there are nurses, physicians, respiratory therapists and other clinicians across the world, many Christian and Non-Christian, who are risking their own health and safety to save the lives of those whose lungs are so wracked by COVID-19 that they are

unable to breathe. There are likewise countless people, from teachers to food workers to social service providers, who are taking risks to attend to those who are especially vulnerable to the pandemic.

Many of them are afraid, but they press on because they have committed themselves to care for the sick and the vulnerable. This commitment to care, this love, does not remove their fear. But it fuels and sustains their courage.

Health care workers and others responding with courage to COVID-19 help us to understand what Jesus meant when he said, in his Sermon on the Mount, "Do not worry about your life." We read in Matthew's Gospel that just before Jesus preached the sermon, people desperate for healing "brought to (Jesus) all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him."

It was these crowds of people struggling with disease, stigma and need that prompted Jesus to go up the mountain and share a sermon that begins with the words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

Like the front-line clinicians in today's COVID-crowded emergency departments and intensive care units, those who heard that sermon may have been exhausted and afraid, for good reason. It is hard to keep an open heart in the midst of overwhelming suffering. Jesus encouraged these careworn disciples to persevere, not because the way would be easy, but because "the kingdom of God and his justice" is worth loving, living and even dying for.

The message for us is to Commit ourselves to this way of love; Jesus says, and we will find ourselves equipped with what we need.

The global COVID pandemic is revealing the beauty of those who stand courageously in the face of fear, because they love those who are in the virus' grip. They are witnesses to all of us.