

^{13:1} Let brotherly love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. ³ Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. ⁴ Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. ⁵ Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." ⁶ So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"
^{4:18} There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. ²¹ And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Members and regular attendees here at Saint Marks know that we place a high premium on the virtue of hospitality. And there is certainly good scriptural basis for such respect.

Throughout the Bible, over and over, the highlighted example of faithfulness to the Lord is identified as HOSPITALITY

Whenever the Jews were reminded of why they celebrate the Passover, the answer given is always the same: **Because you were strangers in a foreign land and God practiced hospitality to you, because the people there would not.**

Whenever Jews were reminded of why they are to take care of the poor and the widow and the homeless, they were always reminded of the same thing: **Because you were**

strangers in a foreign land and God practiced hospitality to you, because the people there would not.

In Matthew 25, when Jesus foretold what the final judgment day would be like – when the sheep are separated from the goats – what is the ULTIMATE LITMUS TEST for salvation?

- Does Jesus say it's the creed that is recited?
- Does Jesus say it is the type of Baptism used?
- Does Jesus say it's the denomination belonged to?
- Does Jesus even say that it's "faith in the blood of the lamb?"

The answers to those questions are No, No, No, and No.

What does Jesus say is the ultimate litmus test for salvation? **Did you practice hospitality to the ones least likely to receive hospitality from others?** That's what determines your salvation.

HOWEVER – LET'S BE HONEST, we live in a time when it sometimes seems that everyone is *presumed to be a terrorist until proven otherwise with several forms of*

identification. We live in a time in which total strangers blow up airplanes occupied by civilian men, women and children traveling on business or pleasure AND put deadly anthrax spores in letters, which kill postal workers. In short, we live in a time of great fear, a time in which things have occurred that only a paranoid person could have imagined a generation ago. Far from having any inclination to "show hospitality to strangers," we instruct our children from their earliest ages never to talk to strangers. We deadbolt our doors, and spend more money on security than ever before. We are so secure that someone visiting from another planet might say we live in prison.

Q: So, why is it that we don't really follow the scriptural exhortation to practice hospitality? **A:** We are more afraid of being assaulted unaware than we care about entertaining angels unaware.

F E A R. That's the problem.

It's like a chemical reaction: the fear factor changes everything. A close friend of mine told me, during a presidential election several years ago, "**Brown, I don't like**

the guy I'm voting for, but I think he will keep me safer, and that's all I care about."

F E A R – like an overpowering catalyst added to any chemical reaction, it changes the way things turn out ... even if we don't like it.

One of the by-products of fear, is also one of it's self-promulgating causes: ***the way we look at things.***

If we look through the eyes of fear, we will certainly see things that frighten us.

Much has been said, and written, over the past few months about the situation that arose on the night of February 26, 2012 between George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin, the resulting murder trial that began June 10, 2013, and the verdict of not guilty that was handed down on July 13.

I have not much entered into that discussion, because it is too easy to Monday-morning quarterback trials, and because the defense of self-defense to murder is too complicated for much of the surface commentary I have heard.

But I did read one excellent commentary that has stuck with me for the past six weeks:

It essentially said that *what happened between George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin that fateful and fatal night did not have to happen. But it did happen because both men had a vision problem. They both were looking for, and saw, someone who was a threat to them. Had both men regarded the other simply as a beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold – instead of seeing only a threat – no death would have happened.*

If we look for reasons to fear, we will find them – **OR MAKE THEM BECOME.**

That's not to say that there is no danger around us. But **we have built a culture that is more dangerous and harmful because of our fear searching.**

Why do we fear? Because there is danger? Or, does the second scripture we read today provide an alternative reason, i.e. **BECAUSE, WE DO NOT KNOW LOVE.**

We fear because we do not know, or believe in love. And *we love, because God first loved us.* Which way do you go?

I had an interesting conversation with a pastor from another state, on one of my journeys doing church work. This pastor told me that he took a trip to his high school reunion, and spent an overnight in a park along the way. That night, he was reading scripture and he was thinking about his friends from high school. Somehow, in the midst of the reverie and the contemplation, he said that he was inspired to think about Jesus as his Best Friend.

He said that, although he was a bit embarrassed to confess it, he had never thought of Jesus as FRIEND before. Savior. Lord. Master. Son of God. All those names and concepts, but never FRIEND. And it was a powerful image, and indeed, the catalyst for a B I G change in his life.

He told me that for the next several weeks, he carried this vision of Jesus by his side, wherever he went. Jesus, his FRIEND. He came to experience the love of God in a very close and personal way. It became an overpowering change in his life. He said that he was sorry that he had spent all these years as a minister, without ever knowing how powerful this could be.

Then, he continued, he preached to his congregation about this change that had occurred in his life. After the worship was over, one of his parishioners came to him and quietly told him that he was worried about him – worried that his pastor was going off the deep end, in some evangelical, fundamentalist way.

The pastor told him, quickly, “**Oh no. It’s just a thing that I’m doing. I’m not telling anyone else that they should do it.**”

[P A U S E] Really?

- Let me (not him) put it to you like this: When you know the love of God through the moment-to-moment experience of Jesus as your best friend – a REAL BFF – then there is a chemical reaction in your life that is strong enough to **overcome the salt of fear so liberally sprinkled in our lives**. OR...(to put it into Jesus’ words): **To be wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove.**
- When you know the love of God through the moment-to-moment experience of Jesus as your best friend, then there is a chemical reaction in your life that is strong enough to allow you to **see other people NOT through the lens of fear.**

- When you know the love of God through the moment-to-moment experience of Jesus as your best friend, then there is a chemical reaction in your life that is strong enough **to practice hospitality daily.**

God always allows us to choose: **Fear** or **Love**? **Fear** or **friendship**? **What is your choice of ingredient?**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.