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When dealing with fear, remember the beatitudes' poor in spirit

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

On Easter Sunday, our pastor got our congregation's attention when, after reading Matthew 28:1-10, he began his sermon by pointing out that in the passage, "Matthew drops the f-bomb four times."

Fear, fear, fear, fear.

It was, of course, an intentionally provocative thing for a preacher to say, but he had a good model for being intentionally provocative: Jesus. And he was right to draw our attention to fear, for in many ways it's what determines the course of world history, to say nothing of our own roles in it.

Some fear is understandable and even justified. Examples: Recently, Americans have been fearing that the loose cannon leading North Korea might unleash a nuclear weapon. And lots of American families continue to fear that someone they love won't make it back home from Afghanistan alive.

It's probably accurate to say that our country's entire military budget is based on fear -- some legitimate, some not. Either way, fear is expensive.

But much of what humans fear comes out of ignorance, which often is self-inflicted. We fear people who are different from us, including those of different races and religions, merely because they're, well, different.

The 18th-century English historian James Anthony Froude understood the implications of allowing fear to fester: "Fear is the parent of cruelty," he wrote. And so we have the history of lynching in this country, plus gang warfare, restrictive real estate covenants, block-busting. The pattern seems eternal: Ignorance

leads to fear, which leads to hatred and cruelty, which sometimes turns violent.

There's a reason that the first thing angels learn in angel school is to say this to fearful people: "Fear not." You could look it up. In Scripture, angels say that all the time. They seem to know our relentless attachment to fear and of our need to find ways to unplug it.

Why unplug it? Because, as Aristotle noted so many centuries ago, "No one loves the man he fears." His words are a stark reminder to people who are supposed to be known by our love. We cannot be effective disciples of Jesus Christ if our hearts are locked down by fear.

It's one reason I've been impressed so far by Pope Francis. One of his obvious goals is to get people to quit fearing the poor and marginalized and instead find ways to minister to them.

In the conclave that elected him pope, Francis was seated next to the archbishop of Sao Paulo, Cardinal Cláudio Hummes. As Joshua J. McElwee of *NCR* reported from Rome, "Hummes, Francis said, 'embraced me and kissed me and said: "Don't forget the poor." And those words came to me: the poor, the poor.' "

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The reality, of course, is that we're all "the poor" in some way. Yes, it certainly includes the billions of people on the planet who are materially bereft. But if we limit the definition to matters of economy, we forget that Jesus was just as mindful of the poor in spirit.

In Matthew 5, Jesus said such people were blessed. Theirs, he said, is the kingdom of heaven, or reign of God. In the upside-down world of the beatitudes, being blessed in such circumstances must mean that "poor in spirit" refers to people who recognize their need for God, who understand they are nothing on their own.

They have nothing to lose and, thus, nothing to fear. And having nothing to fear, they already have entered the reign of God. Which was exactly the point of Jesus' preaching -- the kingdom of God is at hand and can be yours today.

So my pastor and the pope both are telling us that when the world drops f-bombs on us -- fear, fear, fear -- we are to respond with the hope of those who are poor in spirit. Just one question: Why is that so hard to pull off?

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