

I want to tell you about one of my favorite movies. It's called "Defending your Life"—it's a funny movie and is listed as a comedy, but also makes a serious significant point. It's written and directed by Albert Brooks and is his version of what happens after you die.

It seems that, in this movie, after you die you are sent to "Judgment City" where judges decide whether you move on to a higher existence or go back to Earth to try to "get it right" next time around. The deciding factors whether you move up or return are based on your courage and generosity toward others in your lifetime.

It seems that Daniel, played by Brooks, has lived in fear most of his life. His decisions are consistently cautious, and he takes no risks. It is difficult for him to be generous because he lives in fear that he won't have enough for himself. While in "Judgment City" he meets and falls in love with a woman who exhibits a lifetime of valor and generosity. She is obviously going to move on to the next level and it is just as obvious that he is returning to Earth.

In the final scene he decides to risk injury and pain in order to stay with her and the judges, who are witnessing the event, decide that he has learned to be courageous and has shown a willingness to sacrifice and so let him move on as well.

Jesus gives us foundational advice in our Gospel today:

Be at Peace
Don't be afraid

Good advice—but how well do we follow it?

The more significant message in the Gospel is that Jesus says there is one characteristic that identifies us as his followers: Love for each other. That's how outsiders will know that you belong to Jesus' community.

So what is the connection between loving each other, being at peace and having no fear?

Bottom line is this—God wants us to operate out of love and not fear. The context of our decisions should come from our sense of security that God is with us and will not fail us. If we can believe that and operate out of that reality—then we are free to be the being God intended us to be.

Who we are is God’s gift to us. What we do with that is our gift to God. Inside of each of us is a magnificent creature—full of grace, love, and joy. That person is longing to be unleashed—freed from the fears that hold us back. God says to each of us, “be of good courage—do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in me—I truly believe in you.”

To love is a tall order. To love as Jesus is asking us to, is a tall order—and sometimes I feel very SHORT!

Be at peace—easier said than done

Do you have fears that keep you from sleeping at night? Are you letting some nagging doubt or insecurity keep you from making a healthy decision? What are you worried about?

I want to tell you about my latest worry. My latest anxiety is because we have a budget deficit here at the church. I let that fear eat at me for weeks and days. I went on vacation and I interrupted my time off to call in for the finance committee meeting because I was deeply concerned. I’ve written letters to you, I’ve asked the ministry teams and staff to watch their spending and I considered ways to increase our income by fundraising events.

But the problem is that God doesn’t want us to operate our church based on a feeling of scarcity! God doesn’t want us to sit around figuring out how to get money. God is expecting us to use our energy to love one another, to use our energy to help the poor, to use our resources to make St. Paul’s Episcopal Church a center for God’s transforming love! God wants us to be about making life better, spreading the word about the “Good News”. That’s our business—Kingdom building—not building maintenance!

But our fears sometimes get a strangle hold on us and we forget the truth of God's love. As individuals, sometimes we think that if we give too much—there won't be enough for us. In the Kingdom it works just the opposite. The more we give, the more we have. It's like love, the more love we have for others, the more love we have to give. It just grows and grows.

I want to unleash that feeling of confidence and love and courage and believe that what I'm about is to lead you to find your best self. I want us to be about encouraging you and helping you discover your gifts and talents.

Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

Our church life, our common life, our vision for the future is not going to be effective if we live in scarcity. Jesus is calling us to an abundant life—a life of possibilities and joyful generosity. I know we have nothing to fear—I know that God is with us—I know that no matter what happens, God will help see us through.

We need to turn our focus away from what *we* need to what God is calling us to do for others. When we shift our focus away from ourselves—our ability to love expands, our generosity increases, and we begin to be the best version of ourselves.

Let God's love fall over you, cascading down and covering you completely; infusing you with joy, peace, and confidence. The more certain we are of God's love, the easier it is to turn our focus to the needs of those around us.

Jesus says love each other, be at peace, do not let your heart be troubled—have no fear for I am with you. I believe that—I want you to believe that too. Will it show—will our belief that God is with us show in our lives? That's the litmus test. Does our love for God show in our everyday lives?

As you think about the decisions you made in your life, will you find that you've made decisions based on love and generosity? Or will you find that you've made your choices based on fear and scarcity? God is calling us to live full abundant lives—lives of love and joy, peace and generosity. God wants us to be the best version of ourselves. Let go of your fear, doubt and anxiety—believe in God's abundant love and grace. AMEN.