

Fear or Love?

Amanda Udis-Kessler, written for *Whosoever*, Juneteenth (June 19), 2022

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear... (1 John 4:18)

Give in to love or live in fear. (Finale B, *Rent*, Jonathan Larson)

It is hard to know what to say about the profoundly disturbing political, legal, and cultural efforts of white US conservatives (represented by Republican politicians and their right-wing supporters) to hoard power and harm anyone who looks, thinks, believes, or behaves differently from them – at least, it is hard to know what to say other than howling in frustration, rage, and fear. However, if I don't want fear to have the final word, I must find something else to say. So here it is.

Women, LGBTQ+ people, and members of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities in the US are completely justified in being frustrated, rage-filled, and terrified right now, as are many other people who are not wealthy white conservative Christians. The harm being done by powerful white conservatives is profound: laws against teaching about past and current US racism, laws against teaching about sexual diversity, laws that deny women and others assigned female at birth life-saving healthcare, laws attacking young transpeople, violence against marginalized communities across the country, legal attacks on the right of workers to organize, a Supreme Court that may be about to ease gun restrictions while making environmental care more difficult. Democracy itself, however imperfect and incomplete it has always been in this country, is at a new level of risk. So much suffering is being caused, so much flourishing is being damaged. It is heartbreaking and infuriating.

All of this is unimpeachably true. And at the same time...

If I were not so concerned about the ability and willingness of white conservatives to harm anyone unlike themselves, I would feel profoundly sorry for them much of the time. That might sound strange, but it comes down to that most basic of questions: will we give in to love or will we live in fear? Will perfect love cast out fear or will perfect fear cast out love?

Clearly, white conservative actions and priorities are unloving: hatred, violence, and mistreatment of many devalued groups are surely not acts of love. But I think we can say more than that. I think we can say that underneath all that rage, underlying all the cultural and institutional and spiritual and psychological and physical violence is, simply or not so simply, fear. And the depth and power of that fear is as tragic as the harm that the fear is causing – to the rest of us, but also to white conservatives themselves.

Of what exactly are white conservatives afraid? There may be many answers, but here are some possibilities. They are afraid of being “replaced.” Of not being in power. Of not getting their way. Of not being more highly valued than people who are different from them. Of not mattering. Perhaps they are afraid that they will finally have to confront the ways their own

values and politics harm them and those they love as well as those they despise. Maybe they are even afraid about having to feel all that grief that they have channeled into hostility and contempt.

And thus, the ruthlessness where love would be patient. Thus, the cruelty where love would be kind. Thus, the “alternative facts,” gaslighting, and rejection of empirical reality where love would rejoice in the truth. Thus, the impatience, envy, boastfulness, arrogance, rudeness, irritation and resentment, which, as the Apostle Paul reminds us, are not the ways of love.

How profound white conservative fear must be to lead to all this lovelessness! What a tragedy for all of us!

That said, how should LGBTQ+ people of faith and our allies respond to this maelstrom of fear? How can we keep from drowning in it? Just as love begets love, fear begets fear. The fear-based harmful actions of white conservatives cause many of the rest of us fear – completely legitimate fear, it’s worth restating. How can we strive to turn away from fear, live in love, and let that love cast out (at least some of) our fear?

Here are some concrete options available to us:

First, we can practice living into the ways of love, even – and especially – when it is hard to do so. If, as Paul said, love is patient and kind, we can work on being patient and kind. We can, to the best of our ability, reject envy, boasting, arrogance, and rudeness, and perhaps on our best days, reject irritability and resentment (though we should not be too hard on ourselves when that is beyond what the day allows). We can grieve at wrongdoing; we can rejoice in honesty, truthfulness, and our commitment to engaging with actual reality rather than “alternative facts.”

Second, we can “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:16), which will look different for each of us. We can ramp up our spiritual practices, gently tending to our fear and pain, and seeking connection with the loving mystery at the heart of all things. If indeed perfect love can cast out fear, we can seek out that love as much and as often as possible.

Third, we can support each other, individually and communally, in this challenging time. We can be good witnesses for each other’s grief and fear, and we can hold each other accountable so that we do not fall into the temptation to allow our fear to turn into cruel and ugly behavior toward others. We can live into love better when we serve as models and reminders for one another. This can happen in specifically religious contexts, but it can happen in many other contexts as well and should never be religiously limited. Everyone who opposes the tragedies of the day can be part of supportive communities and networks.

Fourth, we can join and support the larger social and political movements against white supremacy, authoritarianism, sexism, heterosexism, unfettered capitalism, and all other inhumane and immoral systems of power causing so much harm. Working collectively against the violence, against the lies, against the devaluation of groups of people, against the denial of empirical reality, is the only systematic hope we have of moving from reactive defensiveness in a

time of danger to potentially bringing about a society more in keeping with Jesus's vision of God's Realm. Which, I hope, is what we are all (in our different ways) trying to do

Finally, as brutally hard as it is not to hate the people who harm us, we can try to cultivate love even toward them. This does not mean liking them, supporting their agendas, or being complicit in their harm of us or others; it means acting as though God loves them as much as God loves us, as though love is as available to them as it is to us. It's worth remembering that the phrase "good Samaritan" essentially means "merciful enemy" and could, in a generous translation, mean "loving enemy." Ultimately, a loving enemy is no enemy at all. Could we be good Samaritans toward white conservatives? Could we model for them a love that could cast out their fear? I don't know the answer, but with the stakes as high as they are, it seems like a possibility worth considering.

Peace and strength to you all in these times of trial. May we give in to love and may we cast out fear, now and all the days to come.