

**Sunday August 24, 2025**  
**Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 16**

**Sermon:** “Fear. Know Evil.”

I’ll call him Johnny. When I knew him he was probably in his mid-twenties, but who could be sure since he had one of those timeless faces and spoke wisdom that belied a youthful appearance. Johnny was not terribly tall, okay, he was short, at least in my estimation. And he was slight. Not at all muscular. He was good looking, I suppose, but I’m neither gay nor a female. Johnny also appeared to be an alcoholic, at least on the surface of things. One more thing about Johnny – he was homeless.

Johnny spent a great deal of his time living in fear. He was afraid to go to the shelters. He was small and totally unable to defend himself physically. A trip to the shelter, for Johnny, would likely end with the loss of everything he owned – like shoes – and probably a trip to the hospital to boot. Johnny preferred to live rough in a park or ravine somewhere. Even there, he was vulnerable, so he hung around with a group of homeless people – for protection. But, the thing about being with that group was that he had to fit in, and that meant consuming vast quantities of cheap alcohol. Failure to do so would have made him an outcast even to those outcasts, and totally alone to fend for himself, which, as I said, he was not physically capable of. Johnny knew his personal safety depended on alcohol abuse.

I can’t even begin to comprehend what was so bad in Johnny’s life that he left home to live on the streets. He was very smart and could have gone far in an education and career – but here he was, homeless and, to all appearances, an alcoholic, all at the tender age of his mid-twenties. What we couldn’t comprehend was why Johnny refused to give up the alcohol and try to change his life.

She was stooped over. She'd been that way for so long that nobody even really knew what her face looked like. There were rumours that, over a generation ago, she had, as a child, stood erect like everyone else, but that was a long time ago. Nobody knew exactly when or exactly why she had become stooped over. They didn't know if it happened gradually or all of a sudden. They only knew that every attempt to straighten her up had failed.

And then one day it happened. A large group of teenagers fell on Johnny and his homeless friends. The teens spat on them, kicked them, beat them, until they lay bleeding and battered, some with broken limbs, more than one with a concussion. Johnny's illusion of safety had been shattered. That was when he gave up drinking cold turkey and sought our help in changing his life. We helped get him housing and get some financial assistance and get enrolled in school. You see, Johnny had never really been an alcoholic. He had used it, out of fear, as a means of seeking protection for himself. And the reason that he had refused to stop drinking and seek to change his life was, well, fear. More specifically it was fear of change. At the end of every day Johnny knew that he had survived that day, and as bad as you and I might think his life was, he knew that he could survive another day just like it. On the other hand the thought of giving up the physical security of his friends in order to build a different life frightened Johnny immensely. Johnny was bound by fear – fear for his safety, and, even more so, fear of giving up his friends, and the security he thought they offered, to change for a better future.

And then one day it happened. A prophet walked into her life and told her, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment," and she immediately straightened up. My question is, what was the ailment she needed setting free from? Was it years of fear that had built up because of something she imagined? Was it fear of standing up straight and looking people in the eye? Was she afraid of what she imagined they thought of her? She had lived so long, at least a generation, stooped over. If she could survive yesterday

stooped over, she could survive today stooped over. Change, standing up straight, came with unknowns, and that was frightening.

Jesus said, “ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?” The word Satan means the deceiver. Had she been deceived? Had her bondage been a trick? Had the fear that kept her stooped over all been for nought? We’ll never know.

What we can know is that this story is not simply a story about an unnamed woman who lived a couple of thousand years ago. This story is not just a story about Johnny a couple of decades ago. This story is a story about us today. It is not just a story about an individual, although that may be true too, it is the story of us as a community, as a culture, as a society, even as a congregation or a denomination. Sometimes we are held bondage by fear; fear of change, fear of the future. Nobody wants to be the one on watch when our church closes, yet many around us and across this country are doing just that, closing. And yet, didn’t Jesus have to die before he could be resurrected?

Fear is the opposite of faith. Fear restricts our field of vision. Fear limits our imagination. Fear can cause us to see nothing more than the two feet we are standing on right now, and when that happens, we fail to see possibilities, opportunities, needs, and ministries that God is calling us to. If we want the church, and I don’t necessarily mean the congregation, but the church that believes in God’s vision and works toward it as a way of life – if we want the church to continue into the future I think many congregations need to die. But before they do, they have one final and crucial ministry to fulfill. They need to birth new congregations and support them for a time.

Imagine a new and younger congregation worshipping in this building, just not on Sunday morning at 10 when we are here. Imagine a congregation that is just as passionate, perhaps more so, about social justice issues and care for the environment and care for the marginalized in our midst, but is several decades younger than us. Such a congregation doesn't have the financial means that we have. Such a congregation doesn't have the experience or wisdom that we have. Such a congregation would need financial support, at least initially, and would need mentorship in areas of things like governance. If we, the United Church of Canada, could birth new congregations like that, and support them in whatever ways they needed until they could stand on their own, then their successes would be our legacy and while one congregation may die, another would be born in its place and the vision and ministry of God would continue into the future.

But fear can stop all of that from happening. I think that fear itself is a form of evil, for it stops vision, and imagination, and change. If we fear, we know evil. Maybe that's why one of the most oft repeated phrases in the Bible is, "Fear not." And why should we fear, for with God all things are possible. In the assurance that God is with us each and every moment of every day we can shrug off the fears that bind us and cripple us. You are set free from that which you allow to bind you. Amen.