

What we fear

Have our security measures cast out our fears? Or have they only diminished our capacity for love?

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [December 4, 2002](#) issue

"We will not live in fear." President Bush's statement to the American people attempts to convince us that the way to ensure that we will not live in fear is to attack Iraq. Surely, the president seems to be suggesting, we can live without fear if we exert our power and eliminate the threat of our enemies.

Yet amid the debates about the propriety of our strategy toward Iraq and the appropriate outrage against proposed preemptive strikes, we have not adequately reflected on the president's presumption. Are we afraid to confront the logic of our fear? Contrast President Bush's statement with 1 John 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 reached perfection in love." Is it the dramatic, perhaps even overpowering use of violence that is most likely to cast out fear? Or perfect love?

We often are attracted to the illusions of the former—even when confronted, not too many days after the president's speech, with the paralyzing effects of a sniper on a metropolitan area equipped with powerful police forces and technology. Do we even know how to account for our fears? What would it mean to believe that the way to cast out fear is to learn more perfectly how to love? Might it involve our willingness to recognize the costs of such love?

In his book *The Enigma of Anger*, Garret Keizer writes: "My friend at church said that anger is often based on fear. I have said that fear is often of suffering. And St. John closes the circle when he writes, 'Love casts out fear.' In other words, love enables us to suffer, to embrace the cross of Christ and, as part of that same embrace, the other people at the Christmas concert, including the woman who annoyed me so."

Whether it is with annoying neighbors or Saddam Hussein, our willingness to inflict violence may be a way of avoiding suffering. Perhaps "perfect fear casts out love"

just as “perfect love casts out fear.” Since September 11, I have heard more discourse shaped by fear and its close ally hatred than discourse shaped by love or a capacity to embrace suffering through the cross of Christ.

Part of the alluring character of a preemptive strike is that presumably “we” will not have to suffer. We’ll strike before they can hurt us. But that logic will lead us to retreat further and further into our secure bunkers, and make us more and more unwilling to engage in the risk and vulnerability that are necessary components of love.

Within American society, we have tried hard to conquer our fears through security measures, increasingly sophisticated monitoring devices, gated communities and the promise of an overpowering use of force. But have these cast out our fears? Or have they only diminished our capacity for love?

The costly character of the love that casts out fear is especially apparent when we are confronted with enemies. Jesus’ injunction to “love your enemies” is a recognition that the only way to cope with one’s fears faithfully is to learn to overcome those fears through suffering, costly love. As a Welsh poet writes, forgiveness and love involve “walking through thorns to stand by your enemy’s side.”

It is a painful process because we do not turn our eyes from the necessity of confronting the wrong that has been done, is being done, and is threatened for the future. I do not pretend for a moment that Saddam Hussein is anything less than an evildoer, a thug who has designs on harming my country and those who live within it. We need to acknowledge the existence and intentions of evildoers, and find ways to confront them following the injunction to love enemies. But this task is quite different from being shaped and determined by our fears. How do we begin to learn to walk through those thorns without learning to embrace suffering perversely? How do we cultivate the courage to refuse the Pollyannaish temptation to pretend that there is no evil, no enemies?

Keizer suggests that we seek a crucial clarity about our priorities by asking a series of questions. “Why am I angry? Is it because I am afraid? Then what do I fear? Is it suffering? If so, what must I suffer in order to maintain some semblance of humanity? And is it as unbearable as I fear? All these questions ultimately lead me to the same place: Whom do I love, and what does that love require?”

If the answer to these last questions is “God is the One whom I love above all, and that love requires that I be willing to suffer even the costs of reaching out to my enemies,” then it becomes clear that we might learn not to live in fear by learning and relearning what it means to be shaped by practices that immerse us in the patterns of God’s love, patterns that lead us not to Christ uncrucified but to Christ crucified and risen.

Could it be that President Bush knew that he had a persuasive rhetorical device because we don’t want to ask Keizer’s questions? That we are shaped less by the One whom we love than we are by desires for security, happiness and material goods? Has our land, although filled with millions of people claiming to follow the crucified and risen Christ, not yet been grasped by a vision of costly, suffering love—the kind of love that casts out fear? We cannot expect the world to understand or show such love, but we disciples can and should be risking that kind of love, difficult though it would be.