

Fear Is a Choice
Gene McAfee
Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian
August 9, 2026

“But he said to them, ‘It is I; do not be afraid.’” – John 6:20

One of the things I learned watching *Finding Your Roots* this week was that Chris Paul's grandmother, Charlena Hill, watched every game he ever played and then called or texted him afterward. Every game.

As Paul described it to Henry Louis Gates, he began to choke up. Because what he was remembering wasn't basketball. It was presence.

Chris Paul was remembering his grandmother's trustworthy presence. Someone kept showing up. And that may be one of the deepest human needs any of us has.

Presence matters. Showing up matters. All of you who have been parents or grandparents know this.

I've heard enough family testimonials at memorial services to know how important it was to the children that their dead parent or grandparent showed up for the games, the recitals, the school plays and the awards ceremonies. They experienced it in their childhood, and they remembered it for the rest of their lives.

Presence strengthens relationships. It nourishes them. It defines and refines them. It helps them do what they're meant to do: reassure us, encourage us, and enlarge us – and sometimes correct us.

When Jesus says to his terrified disciples in this morning's gospel reading, “It is I; do not be afraid,” he's doing what all the best relationships do. He's doing what Charlena Hill's relationship with her celebrity grandson did: reminding him of her abiding presence, of an unbreakable bond of love that doesn't depend on how many assists he made or how many points he scored or whether his team won the game or whether other players liked him. A grandparent's love for a grandchild transcends all of that. That kind of love tells us that we are worthy because of who we are and whose we are, not that our worth earned us that love.

When I was a dean of students, one of the things I came to realize fairly quickly was that the students who were most likely to have difficulties getting through college – and life – were the high achievers who had welded their sense of self to their accomplishments.

Apart from their exceptional abilities, these young people had very little idea of who they were. Their pursuits had often been solitary endeavors, sometimes making relationships outside those pursuits awkward or foreign. Unconsciously, many of these students came to believe that their relationships depended on their accomplishments, and that, in turn, often made them anxious about losing their relationships if they didn't maintain them through their accomplishments.

And it wasn't just those very accomplished and very fragile standout students who are anxious. Have you noticed how much of our ordinary conversation is about anxiety?

We worry about our children. We worry about our health. We worry about retirement. We worry about democracy. We worry about the weather, our jobs, the next medical test, the

next breaking news alert. Fear has become ambient. Sometimes it feels as though anxiety is simply the background music of American life.

So we know what those frightened disciples were experiencing in that boat. We may not share the particulars of their situation, but we do share their very human sense that, despite our best efforts and hardest rowing, life can still capsize us at any minute.

That's the point at which their reality and our reality intersect. And it is precisely at that intersection that the miracle of Jesus occurs. That miracle is not walking on water. The miracle that transcends time and space is the power of Jesus to calm not only a stormy sea but the frightened hearts of ordinary people.

Notice what Jesus does not say. He does not begin with, "The wind is about to stop." He does not promise easier weather. He simply says, "It is I." Presence comes before peace. Relationship comes before reassurance.

That's the miracle we all need and long for. Can the one who calms the sea calm us? Are we prepared to accept the power of the one who has mastery over even natural elements, or do we prefer to continue thrashing about in our confusion and anxiety? If Jesus can tame the waves, do we believe that he can tame the tempests in which we find ourselves right now?

Our lives have been so monetized, we don't often realize that every day someone profits from our fear.

Advertisers profit from it. Politicians profit from it. Cable news profits from it. Social media profits from it.

Fear keeps us watching. Fear keeps us buying. Fear keeps us clicking. Fear keeps us angry enough to come back tomorrow. As Marilynne Robinson wrote in the New York Times Book Review a few years ago, no one in America today has an unkind word to say about fear.

The gospel offers a completely different economy.

Jesus never manipulates frightened people. Instead, he liberates them.

And he doesn't do that through analysis or inviting the fearful to self-analysis. He invites them into a relationship. A relationship with him, the one who said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

And we can accept that invitation or we can reject it, but to live in fear – that is to say, to live in a constant state of anxiety by fixating on anxiety-generators – to live that way is to make a terrible choice.

That's what Jesus makes clear when he tells his disciples not to be afraid. He's telling them that they have the power to direct their attention away from the waves and toward his reassuring presence. He's telling them – and us – to choose a loving presence over debilitating fear.

Now I know that it's not easy for any of us to choose not to be afraid, and for some of us, such as those of us who have lived through trauma, fear can be triggered in us unexpectedly and with devastating effects.

But if we are not to be defined by what has happened to us or by our fear that it may happen again – if, in other words, we are to live the abundant life that Jesus promised us – we have to choose love over fear. Because love is the only force that we know of more powerful than fear. Thus, First John can truthfully say that perfect love casts out fear.

John's gospel famously begins by telling us that the Word of God became flesh and lived among us. That Word didn't come for its own sake; it came for ours. That's why Dietrich Bonhoeffer called that incarnate Word the One for others.

That Word is love, divine love, altruistic love, perfect love, the love that empowered Paul to say, "It is no longer I who live, it is Christ who lives in me." It was Paul's choice to allow God's love, incarnate in Christ Jesus, to take control of his ego, his passions, his loves, and his fears. And if Paul could make that choice, so can we.

And making that choice is not about trying real hard. It's about hearing the words "It is I," knowing the power of the speaker, and allowing Christ to get in the boat with you.

Fear narrows our field of vision. It convinces us that the waves are the whole story. Faith widens our vision until we discover that Christ has been approaching us all along.

It is said that we are the sum of our decisions. Prior to our decisions, however, are our perspectives, shaped by the things we pay attention to. That's what changes when we are saved. Our priorities change. Our perspective shifts. Our values realign. And our fears are replaced by God's love made real in our flesh and blood.

And so I repeat the word of Jesus the Christ to you today that he spoke to those frightened disciples so long ago: "It is I, do not be afraid."

We do not get to choose whether fear comes to us. We do get to choose whether fear stays with us, whether fear takes up residence within us and makes us its home.

Each of us has the option of being defined by human fear or being defined by divine love.

Imagine what we would look like – what the church would look like – if it were the one place in our fearful culture where people learned that they do not have to be afraid.

Imagine a church that cannot be manipulated by politics.

Imagine a church that refuses to confuse busyness with compassion.

Imagine a church that measures decisions not by the calculus of this world but by the foolishness of God's love.

Imagine a church that rows hard—but knows that it never rows alone.

Imagine a church that recognizes that Christ is already in the boat.

Imagine a congregation seeking not simply its next pastor but the abiding presence of its divine shepherd and savior.

Imagine what such a congregation might become. Imagine it. And you will not be afraid.