
Letters to A Young Episcopalian: Fear

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

I'm sorry to hear about how anxious Marah feels. It hurts to know that she is worrying about what she would do if she needed to leave the country quickly.

I agree that all the anti-Muslim rhetoric is incompatible with the command to love our neighbor. I also think that it shows us why the command is so important to our faith.

Just think of the twenty-third Psalm. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me."

Fear is not a bad thing necessarily. It can be helpful. It tells us what we really care about. If you tell me what you're afraid of, I can usually tell you what you love. You're afraid because you don't want to lose what you love.

When we love the wrong things, they become our idols.

We think they give us power or worth. They can't. Yet, we cling to them, giving them our constant attention and distancing ourselves from anyone who appears to threaten them.

In targeting Muslims, we appear to be worshipping the physical security of our bodies. Security is not a bad thing, of course. We wouldn't live long if we weren't safe.

It's just not the ultimate thing. Once we pledge our allegiance to indiscriminate fear, we will never feel safe enough. We will eventually destroy the freedom that we're trying to protect.

The truth is that we are incomplete by ourselves. We need others in order to be free. They give us a chance to know and to love. And, more importantly, they let us experience what it means to be known and loved.

Walking with God requires us to take the risk of trusting people we don't know and going places we haven't been. It doesn't require recklessness, but it does require the embracing of uncertainty and a willingness to be exposed.

The absence of risk does not create life, any more than the absence of disease generates health. As one writer puts it, we are more like a plant than a jewel. The beauty of life is inseparable from its fragility.

When we worship the idol of physical security we can't recognize the Muslim as our neighbor, and therefore we can never really be free.

Real freedom depends on relationships like your friendship with Marah.

I will keep her in my prayers.

Your affectionate uncle,

Ames

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