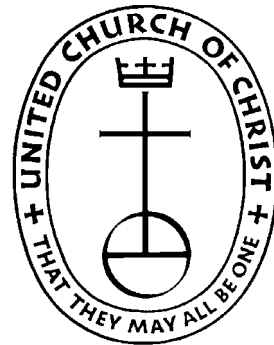


# Responding to Fear and Anger — Contrasting New Ground with Glenn Beck

A Sermon By —  
JERALD M. STINSON  
November 15, 2009



This sermon rejects the fear-mongering promulgated by Glenn Beck and shows how we may find common ground with those with whom we disagree. We need not give up who we are to embrace others.

**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH**

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,  
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*  
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

© 2009 Jerald M. Stinson

Rev. Jerald Stinson  
November 8, 2009 (#1381)

First Congregational Church  
(Long Beach, California)

Reading: Hebrews 13:1-3; Qur'an 49:13; Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5

## Responding to Fear and Anger – Contrasting New Ground with Glenn Beck

We live in a time of considerable fear and anxiety. I think the events of 9/11/2001 changed the lives of all Americans. Ever since the Civil War ended, the wars in which our nation has participated were waged on someone else's soil – in Europe, Japan, Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, the Persian Gulf. But 9/11 taught us that modern warfare can reach people anywhere. War is no longer about soldiers lined up on a battlefield shooting at each other or soldiers tromping through mud in some remote Asian swamp or through sand in a Middle Eastern desert.

Now war can mean a suicide bomber blowing up a bus, a terrorist taking over an airplane or anthrax going through the mail. And that frightens us.

Fear has pushed in on us in many other ways as well. Young soldiers walking on an army base are mowed down by a fanatical killer; a young innocent honor student in Long Beach is killed by a rain of bullets that were part of a gang shooting. The phrase "drive-by shootings" has been added to our vocabulary. In an increasingly violent world, where can we be safe?

Or there is the fear today tied to a struggling global economy. People wonder, how secure is my job? What if I am laid off or face additional furloughs? How safe are my retirement savings? How dependable are Social Security and Medicare? What if I suddenly face a catastrophic illness?

Or parents of grown children ask: what happens if my child loses his or her job, falls into bankruptcy, faces foreclosure on a house? What if my grandchildren have no insurance?

I think fear and anxiety have become part of everyday life for most of us. So does our faith guide us in responding to that fear? I think it does, and today I want to lift up two contrasting responses to fear.

The first is the response to fear illustrated by Glenn Beck, the popular, buzz-cut, angry and weeping icon of television, radio and books; Glenn Beck who makes an incredibly profitable living by playing on the fears of the American people.

Beck believes Americans really cannot stand one another, that we don't trust one

another and that we are willing to believe the worst about one another – and he capitalizes on those fear-filled attitudes. He tells people to hate the corrupt, communist-loving traitors on the left, the racist, greedy warmongers on the right, as well as the dishonest, incompetent conniving media. *Forbes* magazine has estimated that he makes \$23 million a year fanning the flames of American anxieties.

David von Drehle, in a feature article in *Newsweek*, said Beck is “a gifted entrepreneur of angst in a white hot market. A man with his ear uniquely tuned to the precise frequency at which anger, suspicion and the fear that no one’s listening all converge.” He said, “Beck has emerged as a virtuoso on the strings of (people’s) discontent.”

Von Drehle describes Beck as “tireless, funny, self-deprecating, a recovering alcoholic, a convert to Mormonism, a libertarian and one living with ADHD. He is a gifted storyteller with a knack for stitching seemingly unrelated data points into possible (fearful) conspiracies.”

On many occasions in the past several months, Beck has looked into the eye of the camera and said, “I’m afraid and you should be afraid too.” He builds on fear – telling people who they can blame for all the things that leave them afraid.

Beck is afraid of many things – of a one-world government, of an American president who he says “has a deep-seated hatred of white people,” and of both Democrats and Republicans in Washington who he feels are corrupt and whose corruption is spreading like a plague. Beck is even afraid of President Obama’s voluntarism efforts which he fears are an attempt to create a “civilian national-security force that is as strong and powerful as the military.”

So that’s one way to respond to fear – by blaming others, by creating enemies, by fanning fires of hatred. But that certainly is not in synch with the proclamations of our faith, with the teachings and example of Jesus. Nor is it in synch with the teachings of the other two major Abrahamic religions – Judaism and Islam.

I have selected three texts today – one from each of those Abrahamic traditions. Listen first to the text from Christianity, from the book of Hebrews, which is essentially one extended sermon that emerged in a Christian community around the end of the first century of the common era:

*Remember those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them; remember those who are being tortured as though you yourselves were being tortured.*

A simple passage, but one calling us to put ourselves into the shoes of others. In-

stead of fearing those who carry bombs onto busses, can we try to understand the despair that leads someone to act that way? If I still have a job, can I try to understand the fears of those who don't or those afraid they may soon lose their jobs? Being at one with others in God's global community, we are called to put ourselves in their places seeking to understand how they experience life.

Now, a text from Judaism – from the Mishna Sanhedrin, a document about the intersection of law and theology:

*Therefore was Adam created single, to teach you that the destruction of any person's life is tantamount to destroying a whole world and the preservation of a single life is tantamount to preserving the whole world.*

So, this wisdom from ancient Judaism says not only do we need to put ourselves in the shoes of our neighbors, but we need to know that each neighbor is a unique child of God and that the destruction of any person's life – in Iraq, in Palestine, in Afghanistan, in Long Beach, at Fort Hood, at San Quentin – is tantamount to destroying the whole world.

Now a final text, from the Qur'an, Islam's sacred scripture:

*O humankind! We created you from a single pair, a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other, not that you may despise each other. Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is the one who is the most righteous of you.*

We are in nations and tribes that we may learn to know one another, not to despise one another. Glenn Beck has it all wrong. We are not called to name and despise villains and enemies; we are not to belittle and mock other children of God.

Now there is another approach to our fear and anxiety that I think is aligned with the religious affirmations of all three Abrahamic faiths. And I think a small inter-faith venture here in southern California may be an apt example of that approach.

New Ground: A Muslim-Jewish Partnership for Change is a program that brings together about twenty Muslim and Jewish young adults to see if they can arrive at some common ground. They come to know each other and to work in the community together over a period of ten months. Then another group is formed and does the same thing.

New Ground began at the initiative of the Muslim Public Affairs Council and the Progressive Jewish Alliance. It was risky for both organizations to try to partner to-

gether, to make a statement that we are all better in life together than apart. In the words of National Public Radio's Krista Tippett, "This defied the narrative of religiously driven conflict that is the beat of the news."

The co-directors of New Ground are Malka Haya Fenyvesi, the interfaith program director for the Progressive Jewish Alliance, and Aziza Hasan, the interfaith coordinator for the Muslim Public Affairs Council. Aziza is a good personal friend of mine and I hope to have her preach here next spring.

Aziza, who is just 29, was born in Jordan to a Palestinian Muslim father and an American Christian mother. She lived in Jordan for 17 years, struggling with her own identity – was she Christian or Muslim? Is one better than the other? Her Muslim friends all said that her Christian mother was going to hell. Then the family moved to Kansas, where now Aziza, who had become Muslim, and her Muslim father were the ones folks felt would go to hell. Aziza understands from her own experience how important it is to build bridges between people of different religions.

Malka, also in her 20s, is a first-generation American Jew whose Hungarian parents survived World War II and the Holocaust. The lives of her father and grandmother were saved by an amazing Christian woman who manufactured forged documents in the basement of an apartment building in Budapest. So Malka also knows from her family's experience the importance of bridge building.

In New Ground, there is an emphasis on having people be honest with one another, sharing their fears and putting their deepest concerns on the table. That's hard. People who want to get along are reluctant to challenge others. And as the participants in this dialogue grow closer to each other, it is even harder to be honest.

In an NPR interview, Malka said: "We wrestle with the elephant in the room and I think that's really important, and the elephant in the room is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict." She said, "We don't let the elephant take us hostage, but we really say, 'What does this mean?'"

She told of a process they use to deal with hard words like "Occupation," "Zionism," "Israel" and "Palestine." They try to hear what those words mean to the people of each faith community. (To hear more about this process, go to: [http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2009/newground/.](http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2009/newground/))

Malka said, "I think there is always a bridge. The bridge is about understanding. I don't think the bridge is about resolution. Part of what it means to do authentic dialogue work is that it is messy in so many ways."

You see, they know they may not end up agreeing with one another, but find ways to respect one another even while disagreeing. That notion would be totally alien to Glenn Beck, but it is profoundly rooted in those passages I read from Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

Arash Nematollahi, a Muslim participant in New Ground, said he was amazed to learn that the Jewish young adults in the group were genuinely afraid of being annihilated. Arash said, "To somebody like me, that's ridiculous because Israel is a super-power." But once Arash understand the depth of the fear that his Jewish counterparts felt, he could understand more of what they were saying.

During the Israeli attacks on Gaza earlier this year, Malka kept phoning Aziza, her friend, asking her, "So what did this morning's news sound like to your Muslim ears?" That is the kind of genuine dialogue that overcomes fear.

Aziza said, "I recognize that people are scared, and if people are scared, then we need to be able to speak to those fears." And Malka added to that, "We refuse to be enemies. I refuse to be enemies and what that means is to go into this very heated, contentious situation with an open mind. There is still conflict, but there is a willingness to hear and a willingness to understand and a willingness to just sit at the table across from each other."

Aziza said, "You don't have to give up who you are in order to embrace somebody else. It's actually about being able to share your identity in a truthful way so you both grow together."

Two responses – Glenn Beck's creating enemies and New Ground's refusing to be enemies.

When I hear Glenn Beck I am reminded of stand-up comedian Don Rickles, popular in an earlier era. He was known as an "insult comic" – offending and mocking people because of their religion, their race, their physical characteristics. The ultimate put-down artist, his was a mean-spirited humor highlighting differences rather than commonalities. Glenn Beck is like Rickles.

Bill Cosby, another comedian in the same era as Rickles, was more aligned with the New Ground approach. His comedy affirmed the oneness of humankind, all the things we share together. His stories were about the humor inherent in a visit to the dentist; a child promised unlimited ice cream after a tonsillectomy only to discover a throat too sore to accept the reward; or taking children to a fancy restaurant and ending up sending the waiter to McDonald's. Cosby's humor affirms the oneness of all people;

Rickles' humor belittles others.

In a time of fear, our faith calls us to build bridges, like New Ground does. In my three trips to Israel and Palestine, I have seen incredible oppression. Part of me wants to let my anger take over and list enemies that ought to be punished.

But I must follow the example of New Ground. And I saw, amidst the oppression, people who, like Aziza and Malka, "refuse to be enemies." There were those in the Parents' Circle, Israelis and Palestinians who had lost children in the violence, who come together to work jointly for peace; there were the people in Combatants for Peace, those who previously engaged in violence toward one another who now stand together for a peaceful solution to the region's problems. Vivid in my memory are the conversations with some special Israelis in Sderot, where the missiles from Gaza land, who won't break off their friendships with Gazans as they refuse to be enemies.

I think the choice is ours. When we feel fear, whether it is as a result of a terrorist attack somewhere, or shootings at Wilson High School and Fort Hood, or despair related to our own personal lives – problems in relationships, failures at work or school, disappointments in terms of expectations, worries about the health of those we love or the future for our children – in all those situations, we can choose how to respond. We can follow Glenn Beck into a world of stereotypes, anger and enemies. Or we can follow New Ground into a bridge-building world where we simply say, "We refuse to be enemies. We will talk with one another until we find and affirm our commonality."

It is clear to me which of those alternatives Jesus and the Hebrew prophets and Mohammad would choose. Listen again to those words from the Qur'an: "We created you from a single pair, a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other, not that you may despise each other."

In a time of fear, our faith is clear and the choice is ours.

Amen.