

Commentary: Fearing courageously in the face of COVID-19

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(RNS)—As the COVID-19 pandemic grips the world at an exponential rate, many health care professionals are admitting they are scared.

[“The sky is falling,”](#) wrote one pediatric surgeon.

Another physician said, [“It’s the first time in my entire career that I’ve ever been afraid.”](#)

I respect that. Though the North Carolina hospital where I work has not yet seen the rush of cases challenging the health care systems in New York, New Orleans and elsewhere, I am afraid, too.

Is it wrong to fear what I fear?

I fear the toll COVID-19 will exact on the many elderly and medically complex patients with whom I work as a psychiatrist. I fear hospitals near and far will run out of masks, gowns, beds and ventilators. I fear for the health and safety of the many health care workers—young and old—who are at the front lines of caring for the sick.

I fear children in my city will go without food, many people will be economically devastated even if they do not catch the virus, and loneliness and isolation will add to the pandemic’s medical and psychological cost.

Is it wrong to be afraid? When a television reporter asked President Trump and Vice President Pence recently what they would say to Americans who

are scared, [Pence responded](#), “I would say: Do not be afraid; be vigilant.” Pence echoed the words of Jesus, who repeatedly told his disciples, “Do not be afraid,” and “Do not worry about your life.”

But what does it mean for Christian physicians like me not to be afraid in the face of COVID-19, when people are dying?

Two ways of living with fear

The medieval Christian philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas helpfully distinguished between fear as an emotion and fear as a way of living.

The emotion of fear, Aquinas argued, is a good part of being human. We humans are natural and inescapable lovers. When we perceive something threatening those whom we love—including ourselves—we naturally are afraid. If our love is healthy, then our fear is also healthy. That sort of healthy fear is not a sin. Rather, it’s a sign of love.



“Saint Thomas Aquinas” altarpiece by Carlo Crivelli, circa 1476. (Image from the Associated Press courtesy of Creative Commons.)

Everything hinges, Aquinas says, on what we do with that fear.

On one hand, we can fear too little, because we love too little. Aquinas criticizes those who run recklessly into the face of danger without any regard for themselves. To love ourselves and others as we ought means paying attention to our fear when danger threatens.

To act in the face of COVID-19 as if we had nothing to fear—by crowding nightclubs or [churches](#) in violation of local public health directives—is at root a failure of love for ourselves and those who are most vulnerable.

On the other hand, fear can turn us inward, suffocating our loves and, in

the process, ourselves. Fear as a way of living stifles us and locks us into a prison of self-protection. We jealously protect our own safety and the safety of those closest to us. We hoard resources, from [hand sanitizer](#) to [unproven but potentially therapeutic medications](#). We abandon those outside of our close circles who are vulnerable and who are different from us as “not our concern.”

Both of these ways of living—reckless disregard and stifling self-protection—are not centrally problems of fear. They are problems of love. Fearing well in the time of COVID-19 requires that we love well.

What fear requires of us

To love well in the face of fear, Aquinas says, is to be courageous. To be courageous is not to run headlong into the face of danger with no regard for the consequences, nor to deny or dismiss fear.

Courage is not the opposite of fear. Rather, to be courageous is rightly to appraise danger and feel the weight of fear, and yet, to stand firm and do what love requires.

As I write, there are nurses, physicians, respiratory therapists and other clinicians across the world—many Christian and many not—who are risking their own health and safety to save the lives of those whose lungs are so wracked by COVID-19 that they are unable to breathe. There likewise are countless people, from teachers to food workers to social service providers, who are taking risks to attend to those especially vulnerable to the pandemic.

Many of them are afraid, but they press on because they have committed themselves to care for the sick and the vulnerable. This commitment to care, this love, does not remove their fear. But it fuels and sustains their courage.

Jesus' words to people afraid

Health care workers and others responding with courage to COVID-19 help us to understand what Jesus meant when he said in his Sermon on the Mount, "Do not worry about your life."

We read in Matthew's Gospel that just before Jesus preached the sermon, people desperate for healing "brought to (Jesus) all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him" (Matthew 4:24).

These crowds of people struggling with disease, stigma and need prompted Jesus to go up the mountain and share a sermon that begins with the words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

Like the front-line clinicians in today's COVID-crowded emergency departments and intensive care units, those who heard that sermon may have been exhausted and afraid, for good reason. It is hard to keep an open heart in the midst of overwhelming suffering.

Jesus encouraged these careworn disciples to persevere, not because the way would be easy, but because "the kingdom of God and his justice" is worth loving, living and even dying for.

Commit yourself to this way of love, Jesus says, and you will find yourself equipped with what you need.

The global COVID pandemic has revealed many examples of human sin and smallness. But it is also revealing the beauty of those who stand courageously in the face of fear, because they love those who are in the virus' grip. They are witnesses to all of us.

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