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**Unmasking Fear**  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

With Halloween nearly upon us, I have been thinking of one of my favorite TV shows about ghosts, ghouls, and monsters. It began as a response to concerns voiced by parent watch groups in the late 1960's that Saturday morning cartoons were getting too violent for younger viewers. Producers and writers at the Hanna-Barbera animation studios heard those concerns and after a year of development of a new and different type of Saturday morning cartoon, the first episode of the *Scooby-Do Where Are You?* aired in 1969. While some of its own creative team thought the cartoon show about mystery solving teenagers and their dog would not make it past the first season, Fred, Daphne, Velma, Shaggy, and their animated Great Dane Scooby-Doo continue to inhabit screens of all sizes and delight audiences of all ages to this very day.

From a young age, I was attracted to the show in part because it featured group of teens who were able to help others simply by being curious instead of afraid. For those of you who have not had the joy of watching the now iconic cartoon *Scooby-Do Where Are You?* is about four young adults and their dog who rode around in a cool van they called the Mystery Machine and solved mysteries. In most of the early episodes, they stumbled upon the mysteries while they were doing other things. Whether they were at a carnival, a museum, visiting a relative, whenever the Gang learned about what sounded like a paranormal threat like the amusement park ghoul that was driving away customers and threatening the livelihood of the park employees, the Gang, as they called themselves, volunteered to check out what was going on. Through a very informal search for clues, many humorous moments, some misdirects, and bumbling usually caused by Scooby -Doo and his best friend Shaggy, they managed to catch the supposed "ghoul". After the capture, they would explain how they had figured out it was not a supernatural being causing fear but a very human one that was up to no good and in a moment of high drama would then take off the villain's mask to reveal the person and their criminal intent. Most of the time, the Gang was right in figuring out what character we had met along the way had been deceitful and really was the bad guy. And every time, the unmasked villain would snarl, "I'd have gotten away with it too, if it weren't for you meddling kids." Their reward was usually an expression of gratitude along with the satisfaction of knowing they did what they could to help reveal the truth behind the mask of fear.

I learned a few lessons from Scooby and his friends over the years. I watched how collaboration can work between individuals with different skills. I saw how what might be judged as bumbling can be an opportunity to see a problem or situation from a different and usually essential vantage point. I saw the value of curiosity and how a curious or explorative approach to any challenge can lead to creating better situations. Perhaps one of the most memorable and important lessons I learned from *Scooby Doo* was in the unmasking: that behind whatever is causing fear is not a monster that delights in tormenting people, but a person who had chosen selfishness and greed over love of neighbors and God.

Jesus did some unmasking of his own in today's Gospel reading where he was confronted by religious leaders and their questions that were intended to trap him and give them a reason to arrest him. Commentators and scholars like to remind us that the author of Matthew's Gospel wrote it in such a way that we readers would perceive a conflict between two kingdoms: the Kingdom of Heaven and that of the world. Today's Gospel has that feel to it with all the back and forth questions.

Scholars and commentators suggest when the Pharisees asked Jesus about the law at the beginning of today's Gospel they were perhaps attempting to trick him into debate but Jesus answered that the law can be summed up in two commandments: to love God with your whole heart, mind, and soul and to love your neighbor as yourself. When Jesus further stated all other laws and prophets hang on these two commandments, he gave the lens through which we are to interpret scriptures and laws. When the Pharisees were not able to answer Jesus' question about the Messiah through that lens, they were unmasked; their true intentions were visible and that is why they decided not to engage Jesus in any more questions.

And while such unmasking might feel satisfying in and of itself, there is still a great deal for us in today's Gospel reminder of the Great Commandment: to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. Even as followers of Jesus, we do not always consider this part of the commandment as much as we give attention to the second part which is to love our neighbors as ourselves. Perhaps it is easier to give attention to the second part because we can see our neighbors, even the neighbors we do not like. We can watch them, listen to them, and figure out how be friends with them, or at least share community. When our neighbors suffer loss, we can easily see and recognize their needs, and we can figure out ways we can help. This is where a lot of our ministry here at Church of the Good Shepherd happens.

And yet those ministries, as good as they are, won't be as whole as they can be if we don't give equal attention to the first part of the commandment and love God with our whole self: heart, soul, and mind. Perhaps because of the nature of God, it is more challenging to see or envision what loving God looks like in practice.

While God is much larger and mysterious than our neighbors, God is far from absent, and gives us ways to be in relationship with God. First of all, God made us with love and God loves us. God has already seeded the relationship the best way possible: by loving us and desiring more than anything that we love God back. The question then is how do we love God back? The answer is in the commandment: with our whole heart, with our whole soul, with our whole mind. Those are lovely words, and they represent very real practices.

To love God with our heart is about our emotions, our feelings. One concrete way to do this is by practicing gratitude and simply thanking God for your life, all you have, even your challenges, and getting through those challenges. Loving God with your heart is also about sharing with God all your feelings: your frustrations, fears, anger, worries, grief and sorrows, and your joys and delights, simply by naming them, and sharing them with God in prayer.

Loving God with all our soul is about the deeper part of us that is connected to God. This part of us is usually engaged in worship of God, whether we are worshiping God on-line or in-person. Gathering with others to simply be in God's Presence, to praise God even in the midst of pain or uncertainty is an act of love to God. This isn't about stroking God's ego, it is about surrendering our power, our desire for perfection, our struggle for control, and letting God be God and resting in God's love. Sometimes people do this while walking in the woods or engaged in act of labor like raking leaves, or mowing the lawn, or washing dishes, some repetitive task that opens and connects their souls to God's Peace.

Loving God with our whole mind is the practice of curiosity, like a Saturday morning cartoon taught me, to approach learning with an open heart instead of thinking you already know what the lesson or who the bad guy is. It starts with reading scriptures and commentaries and theology and Church history and goes so much deeper. Loving God with our whole mind means learning to recognize Christian values like love and hope in what looks like secular venues such as music, novels, movies, television shows, even Saturday morning cartoons. Or learning to recognize God's Presence in disciplines like science or mathematics. I recently learned about a theoretical mathematician who sees the Holy in complex mathematical equations, reminding me there is no place God cannot be.

As we practice loving God with our whole selves, we may find ourselves learning to not only recognize the holy in our midst, we will also learn to recognize the sin in our midst and learn to confront it without aggressive fear, but with the curiosity, resilience, and persistence of love. We are already aware of the sin that gets in the way of loving our neighbors as ourselves: the destructive stuff of discrimination and the terrible greed of selfishness – those things that rob of us of our humanity and can make us into monsters. That is how the world God made out of love has been co-opted and turned into a nightmare for so many. But it does not have to be. We, like Scooby and his friends, have what it takes to unmask the fears of the nightmare and let God's love restore wholeness and healing to the world. That is how justice ultimately will be realized, God's justice where no one goes hungry, where medical care isn't dependent on socioeconomic status.

One way we are invited to practice the Great Commandment is to join with fellow Episcopalians around the country by participating in A Season of Prayer for the Election. This is not about praying for a winner or loser; instead, it is an opportunity to pray for our government, leadership, each other, and our country. It is an opportunity to acknowledge there is little we can do to control the election. But we can vote, we can pray, and we can love God and each other. This Season of Prayer is a collaboration between the National Church office and Forward Movement to offer a practice of loving God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and love our neighbors as ourselves during a time when it might be very difficult for many.

The Season of Prayer begins on Tuesday, October 27 and continues until the day after the election. The Senior Warden, our own intrepid David Burton, and I are going to host a daily zoom meeting at noon to pray a brief litany – remember litany is a church word for list – and a prayer for the day. All the prayers come from our *Book of Common Prayer*. There is more information on the Friday church email. But even if you cannot join us by zoom, I hope you do find a time to join us in daily prayer for this election. It might prove to be a healing salve for the unrest some folks are feeling during this time.

It is one way we can practice what we believe and enter into this election season with love, to stand against angst and fear, and do some holy meddling, by loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind and our neighbors as ourselves.