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FEAR AND WITCHES

This is Heartbeat. And, I'm Landon Saunders.

To be afraid is dangerous. Because fear will hurt you, it will destroy you. The cornered, trapped man is dangerous—whether hemmed in by law officers—or the victim of his own suspicions and imagination.

One of the most shameful episodes in our nation's history is the series of witchcraft trials that took place in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692. Before the panic ceased, twenty persons had been executed as witches—nineteen of them hanged and one of them pressed to death by large stones being piled on them—and fifty-five persons had been tortured. And, I must be honest to tell you, that the ones who did the accusing and condemning and killing represented themselves as Bible-believing, church-going people. Here were neighbors accusing and condemning neighbors to death, yet were people who believed that God had said, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Why did they do such things? I think, basically, because they were afraid. They lived at a time when their society was undergoing some drastic changes, and they were confused and frightened by it all. As so often happens, they felt someone should be punished for their unhappiness, and in their case, it was the witches. Get rid of the witches and be free of your frustration—it seemed as simple as that.

Terrible things happened that year in Salem. Common decency seems to have disappeared almost completely. It became patriotic and holy to condemn one's neighbor, so that good became evil and evil good. Had they been honest, they might have said, "We do

these things because we are afraid." But, instead, they said, "We do these things because we are good." And they believed it. Fear does strange things!

What can we learn from that experience? For one thing, when we become really frightened, it is easy to conclude that the ones we fear are not persons—but something that is sub-human, maybe even devils. And since, they are not really humans, but devils, then it seems perfectly legitimate to resort to anything to get rid of them. That is why many people are able to justify very inhuman behavior toward others—they no longer see themselves punishing persons, real persons, but sub-humans, devils.

It was good religious people who became convinced that the Teacher had a devil. First, they feared Him. Then they hated Him and decided He must be in league with Satan. And then they killed Him with clear consciences!

It is also interesting to remember that it was a minister who instigated the witchcraft trials in Salem. He always felt persecuted and offended. His personal fears spread to the whole city. One of the judges was influenced. Fear and panic got control of him. Later, when the fever died down, he publicly confessed his wrong and asked forgiveness. The jury also confessed wrong and asked for forgiveness. Does the message come home to us?

It's so easy for us to be conquered by fear and then launch our own witch-hunts.

To escape it, we must try to understand fear, what it is, how it works. We fear the unknown. We fear the unfavorable opinion of other people. We fear disease, financial insecurity and change. And the changes we fear most are those that seem to

threaten our security. For example, if our security lies in keeping our country exactly as it is, then we will fear anything that threatens to change the country. If our security lies in white supremacy, we will be afraid of anything that threatens that. These fears can cause us to hurt others, to have attitudes that are bitter and even cruel, and possibly unlike what we might even very deeply feel. And, to understand some of these things could prevent our being trapped in such fear and allowing that fear to determine our responses to other persons.

The real solution to fear is found in love. Because, "Love contains no fear—indeed fully developed love expels every particle of fear, for fear always contains some of the torture of feeling guilty."

I'm Landon Saunders. My address is: Landon Saunders, Box 7401, Chicago.

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