

Phobos or Philos

Every minute each thought, word and deed on this planet is motivated and manipulated by either fear or love. I'm so familiar with fear-driven behaviour that it often seems simply rational and supremely righteous (but life-sucking all the same).

Fear is so dominant and daunting that it's been broken down into 1000's of items (which hasn't helped one bit): arachnophobia, claustrophobia, agoraphobia, hydrophobia...

Okay, those examples are extreme and don't affect us all (unlike my-kids-won't-turn-out-phobia and not-doing-my-job-well-phobia). But how about xenophobia - the fear of strangers - being hyper and/or hesitant about people different from us? As the world becomes more mixed and meshed we're given chances to enjoy this fear daily. And our frightening "neighbours" don't have to look or sound different from us, they can just think differently (subscribe to the wrong worldview, faith, sexual preference or political party).

Xenophobia gets us attacking and avoiding (fight and flight). Avoiding someone (or a whole bunch of someones) is easy. After all, no one expects me to connect with them and sometimes just ignoring some people actually does make them go away (like newcomers into our neighbourhoods). But attacking comes naturally too, especially verbally (what the Bible calls slander). We don't even have to be well-informed to do this. In fact, it helps if we're not. (Someone was telling a friend of mine what was wrong with Muslims. "Have you ever met one," he finally asked. "No," was the relieved answer. "You need to," my friend said.)

Anyway, I digress. Christians are commanded to do the opposite of xenophobia. We are commanded to philoxenos - to love strangers. This Greek word is usually translated in our Scriptures as "hospitality". "Be hospitable to one another." "Don't forget to practice hospitality." Early Christians did this. They were driven by love. Hospitals, hostels and hospices are still around today.

So, which will it be, phobos or philos / fear or love? Love, of course, but knowing or even wanting it doesn't mean it will rule the day in any given moment of our day.

Love must personally, existentially and repeatedly become more real to me than fear. George MacDonald said, "He who would be born again must awaken his soul unnumbered times a day." I must constantly be aware of the fact that God and I were natural strangers and that he supernaturally loved me the most estranged of strangers, loved me his enemy, loved me and made me... (get this)... his child. He didn't avoid me or attack me. When I was oblivious to all the hatred and hurt that separated us, he absorbed and absolved it. I'm now welcome. I belong. I'm no guest. I'm a full-blooded heir!

What keeps me from loving strangers? The realization that it will cost, that I will suffer some loss. What gets me loving strangers? Knowing that Jesus Christ was hospitable towards me, that he paid and suffered the infinite costs and loss I fear most, that he survived, entered his joy and ensures that strangers and hosts now much more easily become joyful brothers and sisters.