

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Today is a Day of Remembrance and Celebration—remembering and celebrating how God revealed Himself as a Trinity of Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; remembering and celebrating who we are as children of God; remembering and celebrating those who have made the ultimate sacrifice, giving their lives in service to our country; and remembering and celebrating 30 years of unselfish, sacrificial, and redeeming service to our parish by Deacon Gene Favinger.

I thought we might begin by telling a story about Deacon Gene and his beloved wife, Sue (whom I affectionately refer to as Mrs. Deek). As you know since their son, Kevin, married and has presented them with their precious Grand-daughter, Olivia. As a result they have journeyed with some frequency to sunny California to revel in this newest joy in their lives.

On one such visit it seems they decided to visit Yosemite National Park. The Deacon got it in his mind that they would appreciate it more if they went camping. Mrs. Deek expressed her concern about camping because of bears and said she would be more comfortable in a motel. To calm her concerns, Deacon Gene said they'd talk to a park ranger to see what the likelihood was of an encounter with a bear.

The ranger explained, “Well, we haven’t seen any grizzlies in this area so far this year, or black bears, for that matter.” Nervously, Sue said, “You mean there’s two types of bears out here! How can you tell the difference? Which is more dangerous?”

The ranger replied, “Well, that’s easy. See, if the bear chases you up the tree and it comes up after you, it’s a black bear.” If it shakes the tree until you fall out, it’s a grizzly.”

Sue and Gene found a lovely motel room that night.

Who here can’t sympathize with Mrs. Deek’s fear? We all have fears. And, yes, most of us would be afraid to encounter a bear. Fear, is, of course, a common human trait. It begins when we are children—we fear the dark; we fear monsters hiding under our beds; we fear loud noises; we fear even the stillness of the night.

It seems our fears continue into adulthood. In fact, Americans spend more than \$100 billion a year on personal security systems and devices. Why? Because we are afraid.

Time Magazine conducted a poll with the National Institute of Health over a six-year period. They reported that the No. 1 problem in America is anxiety. More than 13 million Americans are afflicted by it, and anxiety, not drugs, is the No. 1 cause of suicide in our country. There is one suicide every two minutes in the United States, and the largest age group is between 15 and 24. Our people are anxious, fearful, even our young people.

That's why the Word that God speaks to us in our second reading today is such a comfort: "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a Spirit of adoption, through whom we cry, 'Abba, Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be gloried with him."

It is a terrible thing to live in fear. One writer put it simply, "They that live in fear are never free." Sophocles proclaimed, "To him who is in fear, everything rustles." And St. John admonishes us with, "Where there is fear, there cannot be love."

Too many of us give in to the bondage of fear. Living in fear is the ultimate form of slavery. There are husbands and wives who are afraid to stand up to abusiveness from their spouses; employees who are afraid to stand up to injustice from their employers; many have failed in their work or their art because they are afraid of making mistakes; young people who are afraid to say "No" to the crowd or to a supposed "friend" because they are afraid of rejection; older people who have given up on life because they no longer have confidence in their ability to cope.

The list goes on and on of the lives that fear has crippled. So, it is Good News indeed to hear, "The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption as children of God..."

My Brothers and Sisters, how often in the Scriptures do we hear Christ speak the words, "Fear not!" The call to follow Christ is a call to boldness. It is a call to let our light shine for all to see. It is a call to courage. Therefore, it seems to me that defeating fear must be a spiritual priority. The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is fear. Fear is our enemy.

You see, fear distorts reality. Someone has turned the word fear into an acronym. Fear is False Evidence Appearing Real. Let me repeat that again: **FEAR IS FALSE EVIDENCE APPEARING REAL.**

When we fear, we have a false view of reality. Fear makes us give up before we even begin. It causes us to take an alternate route rather than the road that leads to our destination. It makes us see obstacles rather than opportunities. Fear is our enemy. It is fear that blinds us and binds us—blinds us to our possibilities and binds us to the safe, sterile lives we have always lived. It is fear that produces sleepless nights as we worry about events over which we probably have no control. Fear distorts reality. When it becomes a pervasive influence in our lives, it is destructive.

How do we overcome fear? Ultimately, the only cure for fear is faith. Consider if you will those whom we remember and celebrate this weekend—those who gave their lives in all the

wars in which we have found ourselves in just the past century: the 1st and 2nd World Wars, the Korea Conflict, the Vietnam War, the Wars in Kuwait and Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as conflicts in Syria, Nigeria, and the hundreds of other places in the world where our brave service men and women have fought and died.

I dare say few, if any of them, were fearless. But they believed. They believed in something greater than themselves. They believed in our country and our cause. They believed freedom was worth dying for. They believed in those fighting beside them. And, yes, they believe in God because as said so often, “There are no atheists in fox holes.”

It would appear that the best way to honor the memory of those who made the ultimate sacrifice to keep us free from fear would be to reject all appeals to our fears and anxieties that serve to divide us and turn us against each other.

Now, let’s turn our attention to another whom we remember and celebrate today, Deacon Gene. To appreciate the great step of faith that Gene and Sue took in answering the call to diaconal service, it’s important to remember that the permanent diaconate was only revived in the Church in 1967, after more than a thousand years in hibernation. So, when Gene began his preparation for service as a deacon, the Church was still trying to find its way in renewing this particular office that had been abandoned for so long. He was forging a new path that few had traveled before him. The Church itself was still stuttering and sputtering in fits and starts as to how to proceed. It had to be a fearful time that required great faith and endurance. As a result, Gene, as well as Sue, probably had to undergo a far more rigorous period of prayer, study, and examination than was required, all while holding down full-time jobs and raising two small children.

I don’t think either had a strong sense of what they were getting themselves into, but their strong faith in God and in each other, and their love for the Church, strengthened their resolve and helped them to overcome every fear and anxiety that arose during those arduous years leading up to Gene’s ordination in 1988.

It wasn’t a given that upon ordination that Gene would be assigned to Our Lady of Consolation. Deacons, like priests, are assigned according to the will of the Archbishop. However, Gene had in Fr. Schneider, his friend and former co-worker at Bishop Shanahan, not only a kindly mentor, but a great advocate. So, upon his ordination, Gene was appointed to serve as Permanent Deacon by then Archbishop Anthony Bevilacqua to our parish.

His ministry has included baptizing hundreds of babies, preaching weekly sermons, arranging liturgies, assisting with R.C.I.A., training and scheduling altar servers, Eucharistic ministers, and proclaimers of the Word, and assisting Fr. Schneider every way he could.

Then, in 1993, Deacon Gene had to face his greatest fear, the appointment of the new pastor. As in the story with which we began this reflection, in meeting him, Gene wasn't sure which kind of bear he was encountering. Was it a bear who would chase him up the tree or was it a bear who would shake the tree until he fell out? Of course, in the intervening years, Deacon Gene found that his fears, like most fears, were baseless. The new pastor turned out to be nothing but a cuddly, old Teddy bear.

Besides all the ministries spoken of earlier, Deacon Gene has provided a service that will outlive him, me, and all of us. Your children and grandchildren and, perhaps, great-grandchildren will benefit from the fact that only Deacon Gene, because of his magnificent penmanship and accuracy in reporting, for the past 25 years has been permitted to make entries into our sacramental record books. I wouldn't even allow visiting bishops to write in those books. Only Gene could touch them. Our Baptism, First Communion, Confirmation, Marriage, and, even, death records are legibly and accurately maintained for all posterity. Thank you, Gene!

Oh, by the way, all of this service Deacon Gene provided freely, at no cost to the parish. In fact, according to the norms of service for Deacons in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, the parish is not permitted to provide any salary for the work of the Deacon. For 30 years of service, Deacon Gene has never been paid.

It has been one of the great privileges of my life to serve along-side Gene Favinger. He is truly a holy man of prayer and deep faith. I admire his gentle spirit, his kindness to all, and his willingness to serve. The love that he and Sue share is a love that has embraced our whole Church Family and is the outward sign that Christian marriage is meant to be—a sign of God's love for his people.

I have been blessed to experience the strength of Gene's support and encouragement in many difficult situations over the years and been humbled by his goodness and generosity in giving himself so freely in service to me and all in our parish.

Gene, as a deacon, you are all a pastor could ever hope to have as a partner, a friend, a co-worker, and I thank you with all of my heart.

I would simply like to end with a thought inspired by the brave men and women who have died in service to our country, as well as being reflective of the genuine loving and faith-filled service that Deacon Gene and Mrs. Deek have provided to us for these past thirty years:

Fear sees the obstacles; Faith sees the way.

Fear sees the darkest night; Faith sees the day.

Fear dreads to take a step; Faith soars on high.

Fear questions, "Who believes?" Faith answers, "I!"