

# Don't be afraid!

**Christmas Day**  
**25<sup>th</sup> December 2017**  
**Luke 2:1-20**

Rev John Barr  
West Epping Uniting Church



Growing up in a wealthy Boston family during the 1960's, young Grandin Temple was fortunate enough to receive specialised education to meet her needs. But it was a difficult, challenging, torturous road. At the age of three and a half Grandin still wasn't walking. At the age of four she still hadn't spoken a word. In her early teens Grandin was prone to constant anxiety attacks.

Described as being a nerdy kid who everyone ridiculed, Grandin was expelled from junior high school for throwing a book at a classmate. It seemed as though Grandin showed little or no interest in her schoolwork. She simply struggled. Life was just being wasted away.

Seeking an explanation, Grandin's mother sought medical opinion. The verdict came as a shock. Grandin was diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum. And this, the doctors of day explained, was a form of schizophrenia resulting from insufficient maternal affection. The only option was to institutionalise this young girl.

Refusing to be defeated by such a brutal diagnosis, Grandin's mother enrolled her daughter in a special school for children with behavioural issues. Here Grandin met William Carlow, a teacher with an eye to working with young people with learning difficulties.

Rather than concentrating on Grandin's deficiencies, Carlow identified Grandin's strengths. For, you see, Grandin was a visual thinker.

Words meant little to her. Grandin's memory worked like full length feature film that could be played in her head at will, allowing her to notice the smallest of details.

And so William Carlow introduced Grandin to sensory-based rather than word-based learning. Here Grandin flourished.

One skill that emerged was Grandin's affinity with animals, for animals perceive their world in a sensory, not a linguistic way. This opened the door to a new career.

(2)

Also having real skills in the area of design, Grandin went on to complete her schooling to graduate from college and finally gain a doctorate to become the Professor of Animal Sciences in Colorado State University and a major consultant to the livestock industry.

This was an incredible achievement for a young woman who had been taunted, mocked and then expelled from junior high school!

What do we see happening here?

Well, areas of strengths were identified. So-called deficiencies were overlooked. And this was - despite the verdict of her former peers - because Grandin Temple was not disabled. She was actually differently-abled!

One observer commented: *“Autism gave Grandin wonderful gifts and intelligence, she had a photographic memory. This is a case of being different, not less”*.

Now this is significant.

Right through her early years Grandin Temple was met with ridicule and hostility. She was constantly teased and put down. This was because Grandin was not like everyone else. Indeed, her difference conjured up all kinds of anxieties and suspicions on the part of those around her. It pressed all sorts of buttons that simply fed the fear that controlled the lives of her contemporaries.

And it was through the determination of her mother, the wise mentoring of her teacher and the sheer courage of Grandin herself, that saw those fears - that would normally consign people like Grandin to life in an institution – challenged and defeated.

Grandin is now an advocate for people on the autism spectrum. Rather than seeing this as a problem to be eliminated, Grandin believes autism plays an important part in our world.

For the eradication of autism from the gene pool, Grandin says, would have serious consequences. This is because, Grandin claims, it would put humankind's future at risk by purging those qualities that have led to major advances to society through culture, science, the arts and technological innovation.

And here we note some of our greatest innovators are on this scale – Mozart, Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton, Emily Dickinson, James Joyce, Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, just to name a few.

While ridicule, hostility and rejection were hurled at Grandin Temple, Grandin took on these fears. With the help of her mother and her teacher, Grandin rose above such fears to become the very person she was created to be!

And friends, how often do we see this happening? People who are endowed with skills and talents - dismissed, overlooked or even banished simply because their very presence challenges the stereotypes and nudges the kind of fears that says they don't belong.

(3)

The point I am seeking to make here is this - the operative word in our community, the thing that alienates, dismisses or even rights-off so many precious people is fear.

Whether it's fear of those who do not mix as most choose to do, whether it is fear of those who learn differently, whether it is fear of those who are of a different age, a different gender or a different sexual orientation, whether it is fear of those who come from different countries or religious backgrounds - fear depreciates, fear devalues. It denigrates that which God has made.

Moreover, fear blinds us. It shuts the door on innovation. It limits our capacity. It dims our understanding of the world around us.

In today's reading from Luke's Gospel the shepherds keeping watch in the fields around Bethlehem are told by an angel not to be afraid – *“Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people”* reads the text.



Now, the normal response to such an awesome, unexpected rather incredible revelation would surely be one of fear. A multitude of heavenly beings doing their thing right above such unassuming shepherds would have seriously been enough to frighten most people off!

But just imagine if these shepherds had cut and run. Just imagine if these guys had bolted. They would have forfeited the incredible opportunity to bear witness to the new born babe who is the very Son of God!

For you see, when fear gets its way, we are losers. When fear is unleashed we fail to see the world the way it is meant to be seen. When fear raises its ugly head we miss out. When fear casts a shadow over our judgement, opportunities are lost, people are devalued and we are all the poorer.

Let me get back to Grandin Temple. If the fear she ran into – the kind that involved the sort of sledging that labelled her as a nerd, a misfit, a retard or a loser – had stuck, then Grandin would have most probably hit a dead end. She would have not succeeded. She would had not developed a highly regarded academic career or, indeed, become an important advocate for others.

(4)

Friends, the courage, the boldness, the audacity and the sheer determination of Grandin Temple surely says something to us. The refusal, on the part of her mother, to allow Grandin to be diagnosed as simply fit for an institution, surely declares an urgent truth. Indeed, the wisdom and the skill of her teacher and mentor, William Carlow, surely communicates an important message.

And this truth, this message, is important to the Christmas story. For you see, if fear had prevailed, not just among the shepherds in the fields, but especially with Mary, the mother of Jesus whose pregnancy was totally unplanned and unexpected, then the question must be asked – would we have a Christmas story to share and celebrate? If fear had seized Joseph as his young betrothed announced she is with child, would we be here today?

Fear limits things. Fear blinds us. Fear dims our understanding. Fear squeezes our capacity and it shuts to door on so many good things.

On this Christmas Day, don't let fear blind you. Don't let fear dim your understanding of life. Don't let fear limit your capacity to be the very person who God created you to be. Don't let fear shut the door on all the possibilities that are before you.

And, importantly, don't let fear curb your awareness, your appreciation, your acceptance and your care for others. There is far too much of this in our world today.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, on this most happy, holy morn let the angels from on high have the last word as they sing out:

*“Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people”*

Don't be afraid – don't let fear limit or control your life - today or any day.

Amen.

