

CONNECTED IN COURAGE
Corona del Mar Community Church, Congregational

Rev. Mary Scifres
Romans 8:12-17

May 27, 2018
Trinity Sunday

“Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. 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 to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”¹

The first time I met Sean and Sarah, they came into my office all smiles, ready to plan their wedding. “Love one another,” seemed to be clearly guiding their steps as they practically floated from the sanctuary into my adjacent office. Newly returned from his second tour of duty in Iraq, Sean was talkative and energetic, Sarah the calmer, more organized of the two. Sarah clearly had every detail well in hand, having an answer for every ceremony question I asked, and precise plans for their special wedding day. Sean and Sarah loved telling me everything that was going on – the new house they bought before he’d left, the remodel they were working on now that he was home, the long commute she had to endure, his new civilian job at the naval shipyard, and – of course - - the many details Sarah had already worked out for their big wedding ceremony and reception. But when Sarah started to tear up for fear she might be missing a detail or two, Sean would take over, remind her it was going to be a great day, and everyone was going to have a great time. This went on for several minutes: Sarah telling me all

¹ Romans 8:12-17, NIV

the details, then tearing up, then Sean trying to calm her down by reminding her, “It will be a great day, and everyone will have a great time.” After four or five times of this routine, Sarah said, “I couldn’t care less about all that! That’s not why I’m crying. I’m just afraid we’re losing each other.” As the tears flowed and Sean held her, they both began to remember why they’d come to see me in the first place. Sarah’s fears fell away as a great conversation about their love and their life began to flow.

It’s so easy to get lost in the details, the plans, the daily tasks, and even the rules, that we can lose sight of what really matters: each other. Yes, a marriage is full of details, plans, daily tasks, and even rules. But what really matters is the loving commitment between two people. It’s that loving commitment that will give them the courage to truly live up to their dream of having and holding one another, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, for better for worse, because staying married no matter what happens takes courage, and that courageous connection of love and commitment is what holds couples together, as it does for churches.

Staying cohesive and whole as a church can be just as challenging as staying cohesive and whole as a couple. Married couples have, on average, about a 50% chance of success. Churches are probably about the same, whether we’re talking about the church of ancient Rome or modern day Corona del Mar. In Paul’s day, churches were constantly debating and discussion which rules they had to follow: “Do we have to eat kosher? Do we have to keep the sabbath day?” Who could actually be a part of the church? “Does everyone have to be Jewish to follow Jesus?” they would ask, or “Can a Gentile like a Roman soldier or a Greek doctor join our little band of followers?” These

were pressing questions, and sometimes the debates and discussion were so contentious and confusing that fear and anxiety started to take over. We have a few letters from the churches that made it for the first hundred years or so – this morning’s scripture comes from one of those letters. But there were just as many communities that never even formed a church, or formed a church that quickly fell apart, or a group of Christians got “found out” and martyred or killed for their beliefs. It was not an easy road to follow Jesus and form the church. It would have been natural to be afraid.

Into that ambiance, Paul reminds us, “Don’t fall back into a spirit of fear! Take courage! You’re adopted by God, beloved and loved children of God.” God’s Spirit is with our spirit, making us one with God and one with each other. We are connected in Spirit – to God and to one another. And this connection makes us God’s children. This connection can give us the courage we need to face whatever life brings.

Paul didn’t want the Roman Christians to lose sight of this truth: Just like Jesus, we are all beloved children of God. Whatever rules we follow (or don’t), whatever spiritual disciplines we practice faithfully (or don’t), however often we read scripture (or don’t), whatever our background or perspective or knowledge or experience, Christ’s love connects us to God with the Spirit’s power and presence. We are not alone. We do not need to be afraid! We are loved. We are beloved children of God! This is the gift of God’s adoption, making us brothers and sisters together, connecting us in Spirit, the Spirit creating through us the family of God. And this connection can give us the courage we need to follow where we are called and love both God and one another, through good times and bad, for better for worse, no matter what.

But the Roman church sometimes lost sight of that fact, just like that young couple were in danger of doing, just as any church or any relationship can find itself in danger of doing – when we lose sight of our connection and focus on fear instead. Where we focus our attention determines our direction and our destination. If we are focused on fear, we are going to move in the direction of fear, and fear will determine our destination. But when we focus on our relationship with God and one another, in the love and God’s Spirit that bind us together, then love and God’s Spirit determine our direction, moving us in the direction of love, moving us ever closer to God’s Spirit, so that love and God’s Spirit can determine our destination. This may not be rocket science, but it can be harder than it sounds.

After all, Sean and Sarah weren’t wrong to want a beautiful wedding and to make plans for a lovely wedding reception that would not only celebrate their love but bless their guests with a wonderful evening together. They weren’t wrong to want to honor that special day and the commitment they would be making with serious plans, for marriage is serious business. Marriage rules matter: “I will be faithful to you. I won’t sleep around. I will care for you in the good times and the bad – no matter how sick you are, no matter how poor we are, no matter how angry you make me.” They knew that commitment mattered, in a way that perhaps military families understand most of all. They had already known bad times along with the good times. Sarah’s tears and fears didn’t come suddenly out of nowhere. It had been a gradual process. First, her fiancée’ was away fighting for our country. She was holding down the home fires, going to work every day and returning home to a lonely house, always wondering, “Will this be the day

when a chaplain knocks on my door, or is this one day closer to Sean returning home safe and sound?” She had known fear; they both had. But their connection had given them the courage to withstand his two deployments in a dangerous war. Finally, he is home, in her arms again, but now they have a house to remodel and a wedding to plan. Perhaps they had underestimated that it takes just as much courage to stay connected in the hum-drum of daily life. He was busy with all of his post-tour duties on base, while also interviewing for a civilian post at the shipyard; she was busy with her commute and all of the wedding plans; they were both busy with contractors and dust and construction in their home. It’s no wonder that they got lost in the details and forgot to spend time together just laughing and loving and deepening their connection as an engaged couple – the very connection that had given them the courage to withstand war seemed to be at risk of weakening so much that they might not be able to withstand a wedding.

In our little church – in any church – this happens as well. Leaders are working day and night to make this church a great place so that we can all us grow in the Spirit and answer God’s call to make this world a better place. But then, one of us gets lost in the details, forgets to pray, speaks a little too harshly, or acts a little too quickly, and soon we’ve lost the connection with God and with one another that brought us here in the first place.

Or, you’re busy young parent, just trying to get the kids dressed and out the door so you’re on time for church. But then someone oversleeps or refuses to eat breakfast or forgets their cell phone as you’re all rushing out the door, and the next thing you know everyone is squished in the car, arms crossed, eyes rolling, and sighs loudly

exploding to make sure everyone else knows just how unhappy they are to be rushing out the door to church. I mean, going to church is supposed to be a good thing, isn't it? But maybe not, if we lose sight of the people we love the most in just trying to get here.

Kind of like a moment my family had last month. We're a small family of three, and several years ago we committed to sharing one car to promote family time and sustainability for the earth. This means we carpool together a lot, and have to coordinate our schedules around car needs. Last month, my son took the train home from school to interview for an internship. The morning of his interview I was meeting a client at the Irvine train station, near to my son's internship interview. The three of us piled into the car for the drive to Irvine, my husband B. J. playing taxi driver so he could take us all out to lunch after our morning appointments. But then, B. J. missed the exit, and I started fussing and fuming at B. J. for making me late – great calming parental plan right before my son's job interview, don't you think? Meanwhile, and I hurriedly texted my client Bill that I would be about 15 minutes late; Bill responded "No worries – gives me time to get my thoughts together before our coaching session." When I met my client Bill – right on time, as his train was a few minutes late anyway – Bill waved to Michael & B. J. as they pulled away and said, "Well that was perfect timing." I laughingly said, "Thanks for your patience. Your patience probably just saved my marriage." He said, "Mary, if your marriage is hanging on to that thin of a string, you'd better get your priorities straight." Always humbling when the coachee becomes the coach! I mean, sharing a car sounds like a great idea – supposed to promote family time and good stewardship of the earth's resources. But perhaps not if we end up losing sight of why

we're sharing the car in the first place and what a gift it is to have that drive time together.

Of course, we all want to do our part to care for this earth and spend time with our loved ones. Likewise, it's beautiful that we want to attend worship and church meetings and Bible studies to help us grow in our faith. Of course, an engaged couple wants to plan a beautiful wedding day. But even those wonderful actions and great intentions can end up going in a wrong direction if we let fear and anxiety guide the way and lose our connection with one another, as Sarah sensed she and Sean were doing as their wedding day grew closer, as I did during a silly navigation error on a family car ride. When we lose sight of each other, when we lose connection with God's love that binds us together, or when we lose focus on the Spirit who is trying to lead us forward, we can end up lost and alone and afraid – when all God wants for us is to know that, in Christ, we are actually found and beloved and filled with the Spirit's power.

So, let's keep our eye on the prize: Spirit leading the way. Whether we're building a family, growing a church, or making our world a better place, let's keep our focus on the priority that matters: love and connection that binds us to God and one another. In doing so, we can celebrate that fear cannot conquer our days or our church or our world – unless we choose to let it do so. This is a time for courage. This is a time for courage and faith that the Spirit's presence is with us in this very moment, in each and every moment of each and every day. This is a time for courage and faith that God's power is strong enough to overcome all of our fears and bind everything – even us – together in perfect harmony. This is a time for courage and faith that Christ's love is beautiful

enough to clean up our ugliness with his grace and clear up our confusion with his guidance so that we can all live into this truth: We are beloved children of God, adopted for a spirit of courage and strong enough to face whatever lies ahead.

We might one day discover ourselves as brave as that young bride who shed so many tears in my office one spring afternoon. Several weeks later, she looked up at her husband with tears of joy in her eyes as I pronounced them husband and wife and her handsome groom offered her a gentle, polite kiss – just the way she’d planned it so her lipstick wouldn’t be ruined for the pictures. As her maid of honor offer her the bouquet, Sarah handed it back and said, “Wait a minute!” so she could plant a big passionate kiss on Sean’s loving lips. Then she grabbed those flowers and held them high above her head like a trophy as she and Sean walked back down the aisle with giant smiles on their faces and lipstick on his lips instead of hers, laughing about their change of plans and walking right into the greatest adventure of their lives, armed with the connection of love and the courage of faith.

Almighty God, hold us close to you. Fill us with your Spirit's power so that we can find the courage we need for this time and these days. Overcome all of our fears and bind us together with the power of your mighty love. Overcome our world's fears and bind all of us on this planet with your powerful love and beautiful grace. Give us courage and faith so that we can all live into this truth: We are your beloved children, adopted for a spirit of courage and strong enough to face whatever lies ahead. In your loving name, we pray. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Receive this blessing as Timothy once received from Paul:

“For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love.” (2 Timothy 1:6-7)

Go, my friends, connected in courage to love as the beloved, so that all the world may know God's powerful love and mighty grace.