

“It Takes a Village”

Isaiah 40:26-31; Romans 12:9-18 ¹

Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint (Isaiah 40:31).

Well, here we are at Mothers’ Day once more. I guess this means that it’s truly Spring, though it’s pretty chilly at the moment.

How can it have been another year already? So much happens in a year. Some of us have become Mothers since last Mothers’ Day. Some of our Mothers have experienced resurrection in this year. And *this year*, we’re all quarantined.

But quarantined or not, what memories and traditions does your family have about Mothers’ Day? The one I remember most was the ritual of walking to the mailbox and cutting roses for each member of our family to wear to church—white to honor Mothers who were with the Lord; red to honor Mothers whose presence we still enjoyed. I remember how, over the years, some of those roses in our family changed from red to white, and I began to glimpse the realities of the cycles of the generations.

I think that if any one word summarizes what we think about on Mothers’ Day, that word would probably be “love.” We understand a Mother’s love to be perhaps the strongest love humans ever know. I want to take the obvious path and think with you this morning about love, but I want to take “Mother Love” and expand it a bit to include us all.

While the Bible usually uses masculine language for God, and Jesus taught us to call God “Father” and “Abba/Daddy,”² feminine images for God also appear in both testaments. God is beyond gender. God is both Father and Mother, our Heavenly Parent, who loves us more than we will ever comprehend on this side of Glory.

Indeed, because God IS Love (1 John 4:8), **Love is the foundational Reality of the universe.** And because God IS Three-in-One and One-in-Three (John 14:15-18), **loving Relationship is the foundational Dynamic of the universe.** And because these two things are True, God intends for our relationships in the Church to be persuasive evidence of their Reality and Truth:

³⁴ “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

To put this another way,

The Community of Faith—the Church—is composed of those persons
who witness to the reality of the Kingdom of God,
who embody the life of the Kingdom in daily experience, and
who continually seek to enlarge the compass of the Kingdom in the world.

I’ve called this sermon “It Takes a Village” as a way of focusing on the fact that, while a Mother’s love is truly unique, the effective raising of godly children requires the support, help, and encouragement of a faith community in order to fully achieve parenting’s divine purpose. And even beyond childhood, we continue to need the support, help, and encouragement of the

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on 5.10.20, during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Mother’s Day.

² Matthew 6:9; Mark 14:36; Ruth 2:12; Matthew 23:37.

community of faith in order to fulfill God's purposes for our lives.³ That's the idea I was trying to communicate through the Scripture Andrew read earlier about life in the community of faith:

⁹ Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.

¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone (Romans 12:9-18).

By God's gracious kindness, our relationships with one another in this congregation are as close to the reality envisioned in the New Testament as anything I've ever experienced. As Dr. Homer Carter put it after serving as our Interim Pastor twenty years ago, "CBF is what I wish every church I've ever served had been like." Like Homer, I've served a number of good churches, and I agree with his assessment about this one.

Along that line, when the person who is to become your next Senior Pastor first hears about CBF, one of the first things they'll do is to check out our website. And one of the main things they'll be looking for will be evidences of how we live and love together. It was so for me years ago, and it warmed my heart to find these words in our Church Covenant:

- Because God has accepted me, I accept you, my friends, into my life and into my care. I covenant to accept you as you are and hope that we can grow together to be mature children of God.
- Because I have experienced the forgiveness of God in my life, I covenant with you as a friend in Christ to forgive you, even when I feel the pain you may cause me.
- Because I know God's help and support in my life, I covenant, my friends, to support you to the best of my abilities, in times of your grief, stress and sickness.
- Because we are members of Christ's Body, the Church, I covenant with you to share life and service with you, with all of its joys and sorrows. I covenant to be concerned about you and your family. I promise to defend you as friends from those who would deny you their love and respect. I covenant to be honest with you, even when it may be painful to us both.
- I covenant to respond when you try to help me. I promise to trust that you act from a concern for me.
- I covenant with you that henceforth I will commit my life to be your friend in Jesus Christ, the One who has touched us all and given our lives meaning.

Isn't that good? So what I want to do on this COVID Mothers' Day is to share some stories about what such friendship looks like, organizing those stories around a verse you probably have memorized (if you don't, you should): ***Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint*** (Isaiah 40:31).

³ Ephesians 2:10

Soaring on Wings like Eagles: Several years ago, Edward Farrell traveled from Detroit to Ireland to celebrate his favorite uncle's 80th birthday. On the birthday morning, Ed and his uncle got up before dawn and went for a walk along the shore of Lake Killarney.

After watching the sun rise in silence for about twenty minutes, Ed's uncle began to skip along the beach, smiling radiantly. After catching up with his uncle, Ed asked, "Uncle Seamus, you look very happy. Will you tell me why?"

"Yes, lad," the old man said, tears streaming down his face. "You see, the Father is fond of me. Ah, me Father is so very fond of me."⁴

Oh, my friend, how long has it been since you skipped for joy like Uncle Seamus did, caught up in the wonder of God's delight in you? How long has it been since you were overcome by whistling or humming or singing or laughing in the sheer joy and delight of your relationship with God?

Such delight lies behind Zephaniah 3:17, my favorite verse in the Bible; and such delight is possible, even during quarantine: *The LORD your God is with you. He is mighty to save! He will take great delight in you. He will comfort you with his love. He will rejoice over you with singing!*

Running without Weariness. Hopefully, you and I have quite a few days on which we "soar like eagles"; but we can't expect every day to be like that. Some days are not quite "soaring" days, but we're still able to get about pretty well. Maybe we could call those "running without weariness" days

When Mr. Alter met his fifth-grade class for the first time at Lake Elementary in Oceanside, California, fourteen boys in the class had no hair. One of the boys, Ian O'Gorman, had lost his hair due to chemotherapy, and thirteen of his friends had shaved their heads, too. "If everybody has his head shaved, sometimes people don't know who's who," eleven year-old Scott Sebellius said. "They don't know who has cancer and who just shaved their heads."

Ten year-old Kyle Hanslik started it all. He talked to the other boys, and off they went to the barber shop. "The last thing he would want is to not fit in," Kyle said. "We just wanted to make him feel better."⁵ The Bible puts it this way: "*Share each other's troubles and problems, and in this way obey the law of Christ*" (Galatians 6:2). Those boys were running alongside their friend.

Another story. After an accident in which she lost her arm, a girl named Jamie refused to go to school or church for an entire year. Finally Jamie thought she might be able to face her peers. In preparation for this important moment, her mother called her Sunday school teacher and asked that he not call attention to Jamie. The teacher promised, but when he got sick on Sunday and had to call a substitute, he forgot to tell the second teacher about Jamie.

At the conclusion of the lesson that day, which was about inviting friends to church, the sub led the class in doing the hand motions to the familiar children's poem: "Here's the church. Here's the steeple. Open the door, see all the people."

⁴ Brennan Manning, *The Wisdom of Tenderness* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), pp. 25-26. Uncle Seamus's exclamation is a frequent refrain on God's lips in *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity*, by Paul Young: "I'm *especially* fond of you!"

⁵ Sherman Buford, Fairmont, West Virginia, in *Leadership*, vol. 15, no. 3; also an Associated Press story in March, 1994.

Jamie's eyes filled with tears. A 13-year-old boy realized how she must be feeling and knelt beside her. With one hand apiece, they supported each other, making the church, steeple, and people. Together they illustrated what real church is.⁶

Walking without Fainting. Finally, there's a third dimension to what God says about faith community in Isaiah 40:31. Sometimes we soar like the eagles. Sometimes we continue running because of God's encouragement, whether that encouragement comes through other people or through God's own direct action. And sometimes the best we can do in our struggle is just to stumble along.

All of us have days like that. For some of us, that's what life is like every single day, because we are caregivers for loved ones whose minds and bodies have been overtaken by disease. Our world is a 24/7/365 world in which finding rest is much harder to do than simply deciding to take a vacation. The needs of our loved ones never take a vacation . . . ever. The care we offer is heart-felt and gladly given, but we are weary—wary down to the very marrow of our bones.

Others of us are weary today because disease and pain have invaded, not the body of a loved one, but the very body we ourselves inhabit. We are weary of the never-ending pain, of night after endless night when sleep eludes us, of joints that move only with great struggle, of minds that age has made sluggish or that depression has dulled.

Some of us this morning can hardly remember what it's like to "soar on wings like eagles," and "running without weariness" sounds like somebody else's life. Even walking without stumbling and fainting seems like more than we have left to give. If that's where you are this morning, my friend, our Lord Christ says to you, "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest*" (Matthew 11:28).

One of my very favorite stories is Roy Edgemon's story about a little girl named Susie. Susie had been playing in the yard before dinner, but she didn't come in to eat when she was called. After a canvas of the neighborhood failed to find her, Susie's distraught parents were about to call the police when Susie walked through the door.

In response to her parents' frantic "Where have you been?!" Susie responded, "I went over to Sally's house. The head had come off of one of her favorite dolls, and she hadn't been able to get it back on. When I couldn't get it back on either, Sally began to cry, and I've been helping Sally cry."⁷

I'm sure you know that one of the reasons we so treasure the twenty-third Psalm is that it speaks honestly about the Valley of the Shadow of Death, of the Strength that God gives us in that Valley, and of the glad Welcome that awaits us on the Other Side. When life gets really hard, we need not try to protect one another from tears—they are God's good gift. But we can sit quietly with one another, pass the Kleenex to one another, embrace one another, and help one another to bear the load.

Several years ago, our son-in-law, Matt, was trying to do something on Jill's laptop. We both got frustrated with how VERY slowly the machine responded. It wasn't until the next day that I discovered that the computer had been so slow because it had been trying to simultaneously download four different program updates from the Internet in the background.

⁶ Billy Waters, *Teacher Touch* (Colorado Springs: Cook, 1999).

⁷ Roy T. Edgemon, *The Doctrines Baptists Believe* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1988), p. 124.

Like that computer, there's a lot going on in the background in all of our lives—struggles of which only God may know. It's not necessary to scratch any of us very deeply to touch the pain in our hearts; and when, for any of a hundred reasons, one of our journeys leads through the "Valley of the Shadow," it's our mutual privilege to provide a safe place for one another, even in times when we may not be sure we even believe in God anymore.

During such times of Darkness, the faith community "believes for" the broken one, surrounding her or him with others who are still able to believe, whose vision is not presently dimmed by tears.⁸ Tears of faith can work deep healing.

When David Hansen was eight years old, his youngest sister was diagnosed with a life-threatening disease. "Not long after this," David wrote, "my father began weeping in church every Sunday. He didn't cry out, but his voice cracked as he tried to sing and his tears flowed freely and without shame. I never asked him why he was crying, and I didn't know what he was thinking. I still don't. But something important happened inside him during worship."

Years later, David's wife, Debbie, got Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. In just three weeks, Debbie's life changed from being a graduate student and adjunct professor to being in bed with fever, severe short-term memory loss, and barely enough energy to take a shower. Still, on most weeks, Debbie made it to church.

"During worship," David wrote, "Debbie sat and wept, the same way my father had thirty years before. I figured the same thing was happening inside her that was happening inside my father. The Spirit was praying from within."⁹

David's father and his wife were experiencing what Paul described in Romans 8:26-27: *"the Holy Spirit helps us in our distress. For we don't even know what we should pray for, nor how we should pray. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will."*

Unutterable, powerful, transforming changes were taking place in those tearful experiences of worship. Healing was underway; and Debbie is now well and is a school psychologist.

Some years ago, I asked one of our members in Bristol how things were going with her walking during her recovery from a broken ankle. I was struck by her reply: "How the walking goes depends on who's walking with you." Although Jean was talking about physical therapists, her answer was far more profound than she realized in that moment: "**How the walking goes depends on who's walking with you.**" That's a beautiful statement about the Body of Christ.

And so, my friends, on this COVID Mothers' Day, my prayer for you is that whether you are soaring, running, or walking today, you have a "village" of faith friends who have covenanted to travel with you. And I hope that on the days when you are able to soar and to run, that you'll choose to walk with faith friends for whom the days are otherwise.

Psychiatrist Scott Peck wrote that "When I am with a group of human beings committed to hanging in there through both the agony and the joy of community, I have a dim sense that I am

⁸ Evelyn Whitehead and James Whitehead, *Community of Faith*, p. 14.

⁹ David Hansen, "Holy Multi-Tasking," *Leadership* (Spring 2003), 106.

participating in a phenomenon for which there is only one word. I almost hesitate to use it. The word is “glory.”¹⁰

Yes, my friends, on this Mothers’ Day, we’re all quarantined; but we’re going to get through this . . . **together. How the walking goes depends on who’s walking with you.**

Keep on keeping on through this quarantine, my friends. Walk on.

¹⁰Scott Peck, *The Different Drum.*, p. 106.