

Loving the Spider

Texts: 1 John 4:18

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on November 15, 2020

Veteran's Day is a time we often think about courage. We almost never talk about the men and women in uniform without adding the word "brave." And that's appropriate. But military service is not the only place we find bravery, and courage comes in many forms. It takes deep wells of courage to face a life-altering disease, to admit we were wrong, to leave home, to speak truth to power, to become vulnerable enough for real relationship, to ask for help, to live with grief, to turn the other cheek. Jesus asks us to take up a cross and live as he did. But how can we do that when some days our struggles are so intense that we barely have the courage to get out of bed? If there's one thing that 2020 is asking of us, it's to have courage. But how do we get there?

We can't talk about courage without first talking about fear. If you're human, you've known fear, and if you haven't felt at least a little afraid in 2020, then, man—I'll have what you're having! We typically think about courage being good and fear being bad; but fear springs up from the most primitive region of our brains for a reason. Fear is the natural, instinctive response to a threat, and for millennia millions of creatures have lived to see another day because of it. Fear has a proper and necessary place in every life.

We also typically think that those who have courage have no fear, and that's not accurate either, nor would it be helpful. Being afraid isn't some kind of character defect, and it doesn't prevent us from having courage. Courage is not about somehow learning never to be afraid again. It's about learning how to stop our fear from interfering with living a life of integrity, compassion, and joy. For most of us there are times when fear keeps us from being the person God is calling us to be. A moment comes when we need courage and discover to our dismay that we couldn't summon it when it mattered. We let fear make the decision and we ended up hurting ourselves, someone else, and frequently both. That's what we want to fix.

The Bible has a solution, and by now you won't be surprised to hear me tell you what it is: 1 John 4:18 tells us, *There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear.* Love, yet again, is the answer we seek. Remember, love in its biblical sense is not about our feelings. Love is an ethic—a moral code—a decision we make about how we'll live out our lives in the world. It's that commitment to act with love that drives out fear, or at least sidelines it enough that we can live out the values we profess.

The Bible verse on which I hang every scrap of my theology comes a little earlier in 1 John 4—1 John 4:8b to be exact: *"God is love."* From that, I've come to believe that every human virtue is a manifestation of love. We come to know those manifestations by different names, depending on what we're facing. For example, when love meets pain, we call it compassion. When love meets frustration, we call it patience. When love meets power, we call it humility. And when we bring the power of love to the experience of fear, we call it courage. While the Bible is telling us is that fear and love are competing powers but, when they face off head-to-head, love wins. Every. Single. Time.

When any kind of fear strikes, our natural instincts give us three options: Fight, run, or play dead—fight, flight, or freeze as they're often termed. That instantaneous, gut reaction to save our own hides is normal and doesn't represent a real choice—at least not without training and practice. That need for training and practice is why we have things like fire drills. We practice over and over what to do in case of a fire until it's ingrained enough that when an actual fire happens our brain serves up an additional option: Fight, flight, freeze, or walk calmly to the nearest exit. 1 John 4:18 is like our spiritual fire drill, trying to instill in us a fourth option to whatever frightens us: fight, flight, freeze, or love. When we can get love to the point of an instinctual response, we'll have courage whenever we need it.

But we have to have those fire drills. We have to consciously train ourselves first to recognize that we're afraid and second to remind ourselves that love is a choice we can make even then, even if it's layered over one of the other options. Fight, flight, or freeze can all be choices we make out of love rather than mere instinct. But adopting an ethic of love can also open up other choices beyond those three.

The first consistent fear I remember having as a child was the fear of spiders. Whenever I saw a spider, I would scream like the world was coming to an end and my mother would come to the rescue. My mother loved everything on God's green earth, and she would find the spider, coax it onto a piece of paper or into a jar and gently put the spider outside.

She tried to help me. She spent time educating me about spiders and showed me beautiful webs that glistened with dew in the sun. She reminded me that spiders, too, were God's creatures. She read me *Charlotte's Web*. But it didn't matter. Whether I was five or twelve or seventeen, I still screamed when I saw a spider and she still came to rescue it. Then I got married. In my new home with my new husband, I saw a spider. I screamed and my dutiful husband came to the rescue. Squash. No more spider. He looked proud.

Poor guy—instead of being thankful, I was horrified. “You weren't supposed to kill it!” All my mother's lessons about God's creatures had sunk in, but it was always easier to scream and let my mother deal with it. But now something God made had died just because I was a coward. For the first time, I felt God's love for the spider. I never screamed at a spider again, because I knew that if I did, it would die. It still took time for me to get my natural instinct under control. Every appearance of a spider was like the fire drill. “Love the spider, Anne,” I would say to myself. “God made the spider, Anne. Calm down. Love the spider like God loves the spider.”

I gradually went from sitting without screaming, to cautiously moving away, to coaxing it onto a piece of paper—the far end of the paper—and putting it outside. I failed at times. But when I gave in to my fear and squashed the spider, I felt like Lizzie Borden and vowed to do better. We co-exist now in peace. I had to drill the option into myself, but eventually, my commitment to act with love drove out the fear. Mostly. If they're really big and drop on me unexpectedly, all bets are off.

Conquering my fear of spiders didn't get me nominated as a CNN Hero. But it did bring one more piece of my life in line with what I professed to believe. It made my love for the world a little more perfect and gave me both the confidence and practice I would need to face down the greater fears that would come at me down the road.

The heroes whose great acts of courage we hear about in the news or that we recognize on Veteran's Day are not genetically different than you or me. Courage isn't something that we are born with or without. Courage is a discipline that can be learned and developed by anyone willing to make the commitment to let love guide their actions.

That's the commitment we profess when we call ourselves Christian—disciples of Jesus. God is love and we believe Jesus is love incarnate; so naming ourselves as Christian is to proclaim that we've made a commitment to make love the guiding principle of our actions. But just like the vows taken by a couple on their wedding day don't keep themselves, our commitment to be guided by the ethic of love that Jesus taught takes vigilance, discipline, and practice.

That's a lifelong task, which means that deep down we're all some combination of hero and coward. Even Indiana Jones was afraid of snakes. Those who pull someone from a burning building without a second thought might still struggle to find a well of courage to face their own helplessness when a loved one drifts into the fog of Alzheimer's. Those who bravely speak truth to even the world's most powerful may still be terrified that no one will ever really love them for who they are and be unable to own up to their own mistakes.

We don't need to beat ourselves up when fear gets the better of us and our courage fails. We just need to figure out where our love might be lacking and work on that. Sometimes we don't love others enough; sometimes we don't love ourselves. But if fear keeps us from living out the faith we profess, we don't need more penance; we need more love.

The challenge set before us in 2020 is the challenge of finding our courage. As a nation we've become good at screaming for someone else to deal with the spider, lashing out and squashing the spider, or hiding under the covers so that we don't have to see the spider. We are abjectly awful at stepping up to face the spider with a commitment to love and discovering the range of other options that courage brings. We need to learn not only to face our fear, but to face our fear with love. That's how God becomes present in even the most terrifying situations. We bring God there when we bring our love, because God is love and perfect love casts out all fear.

But if we want healing for our nation, healing for our church, or anything else, we have to begin with ourselves. It all goes back to the Great Commandment. Express your love of God by loving your neighbor as yourself. No calling for Mom to do it, no lashing out at the dog, no hiding, just small acts of love that honor both ourselves and others. It's okay to be afraid. And sometimes it's necessary because some of us truly are in danger. Courage does not insulate us from death; but it does proclaim that love is the stronger power. It does change the world.

We all are fearful in one way or another. Own it. Then we can stand up and say, "Okay, what now? What would love do here? I see a scary spider. What does God see?" That doesn't happen overnight; we're being transformed from the inside out. But if we can do it, then bit by bit, person by person, family by family, church by church, town by town, nation by nation, we build a world that can deliver both justice and peace for us all.

I leave you with the words of Paul at the end of Romans 8:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who love us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen and Amen.