

**The Sixth Sunday After Easter
May 9, 2021
A Sermon Written for Mother's Day
Based on Psalm 22:9-11
"Mothering as En-Couraging"
By Rev. Ruth Ragovin
First Christian Church
Murray, KY**



*Rachel with her children Eliana and Isaac Benton-Ragovin
Photo Credit: Terri Benton*

There is a story told by the medical doctor Rachel Remen from her book *My Grandfather's Blessings*, which I believe speaks to our celebration of Mother's Day today:

"In thinking about the special bond between grandparent and grandchild, I remember a birth that I attended long ago. The baby's father, a first-generation Mexican-American, was a graduate student at the university where I worked. He had married another student, a young woman from Boston whose family had been here for several generations. This was their first baby, and they wanted the very best of care.

The university clinics were prepared to offer that. The young couple had gone through childbirth training together and had attended parenting classes as well. They were ready and so were we with the full power of contemporary obstetrical and pediatric medicine to support us.

But things had not gone well. The labor was long and very difficult. After many hours, the obstetricians offered the couple a surgical intervention. But the young woman had been fearful of having a c-section and they had refused. Several more hours went by, during which the obstetricians called me in as a pediatric consultant. It was decided to offer the couple surgery again. Despite her exhaustion, her pain, and the pleading of her husband, the young woman was adamant. She would not have this surgery. She was too frightened. Another hour passed without much progress, and in desperation the young man called his mother-in-law on the East Coast and asked her to speak to Jennifer, his wife, about having the surgery. While they spoke, he went with me into the waiting room to tell his own father what was happening.

Although he had come to California from Mexico long ago, Michael's father spoke little English. He was a man close to the land, weathered and strong, at first a migrant farmworker and then, with the help of his sons, the owner of a small farm in the Santa Clara Valley. Michael was his eldest. He had been sitting in this room for many hours awaiting the birth of his first grandchild.

He listened carefully as Michael told him what was happening, his face growing serious and thoughtful. Then he nodded and said a few words in Spanish to his son and put an arm around his shoulders. I could see Michael relax a little. Afterward, we went back to the labor room to find that after speaking with her mother, Jennifer had at last decided to go ahead with surgery.

Jennifer, her eyes filled with tears, lay back in her bed, exhausted. Most of the obstetrical team went to prepare the operating room for the c-section, and I went up two floors to my office to let them know that I would be attending the surgery to care for the baby. I had barely reached my desk when I received a stat page from Jennifer's

obstetrician. Before she could be taken to the operating room, Jennifer had rallied and with three great pushes had delivered her baby. “Everyone is fine,” said the obstetrician, and over the phone, I could hear the baby crying. It was a boy.

Afterward, I asked Michael what he thought had happened. He replied that the obstetricians had offered him several explanations, but he actually thought it had something to do with his father. Seeing my look of surprise, he smiled. “My father is a great man,” he told me. When he had gone to tell his father that the baby had been born without the surgery, the older man had smiled and nodded. “**There had been much fear,**” his father had told him in Spanish. He had heard about his daughter-in-law’s fear, and he had also felt the fear in his son Miguel. So he had known that the baby, too, was afraid. And so, sitting alone in the waiting room, he had spoken with his grandchild in his mind, **encouraging** him to come and be born.

He had shown the baby his many memories of the beauty of the land, its dawns, and sunsets, the new crops and the rich harvests. He had told the baby that he looked forward to walking together on the earth. He had spoken of the goodness of life, of friendship and laughter and good work. And lastly, he had spoken of his love for the family. He had remembered his own father in Mexico and his wife, both now dead. One by one, he had spoken of the baby’s uncles, his sons. Of their goodness and their strength. Of his pride in them and in the women they had married. He shared memories of Christmas and birthdays and weddings. Of the joy they took in each other’s lives. He had offered the baby his heart. And the baby had come.

Over the years, [writes Rachel Remen] I have attended many births, as a pediatrician or a birth coach, a family member of a friend. I sometimes suggest to parents in labor that they reach out to their unborn child in just this same way, showing their baby mental images of the world’s goodness, sharing their love of life to **strengthen** and **encourage** their baby in this difficult passage.” (Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., “Finding the Way,” *My Grandfather’s Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging* [NY: Riverhead, 2000], pp. 260-262)

The fear of the mother was passed on to her unborn child, who was then too afraid to be born. When images of hope and beauty and goodness and strength and love were spoken then the baby emerged easily into the world. Fear prevented birth. Words of hope and love allowed birth to take place.

For many people one of the first words that comes to mind when we think about mothers is that of love. There is nothing like a mother’s love. There is nothing like a mother’s

heart. Guess what the Bible says is the opposite of love? I know that most of us, off the top of our heads, will answer that obviously the opposite of love is hate. WRONG!

The Christian teaching is that the opposite of love is fear. We read in I John 4:19 that ***“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.”*** Why is fear the opposite of love? It is because fear kills our souls by destroying the dreams and the visions we hold for our lives. Fear keeps our souls small and shriveled. Fear keeps us stuck. Fear keeps us in mediocrity. And passing that fear onto our children keeps them stuck in mediocrity too. It thwarts their potential.

That we should not succumb to fear is a constant theme in the Bible. It seems that one of God’s favorite themes is ‘Do not be afraid’ or ‘Fear not!’ Listen to just a few passages from the Bible where we are told not to be afraid. Jesus told his disciples at the Last Supper ***“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid”*** (John 14:27). We hear God telling the Israelites through the prophet Isaiah: ***“You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off”; fear not, for I am with you, be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious hand”*** (Isaiah 41:9-10). In Joshua we read: ***“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; be not frightened, neither be dismayed; for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”*** (Joshua 1:9)

Why are there so many passages in the Bible about fear? Because fear prevents the birthing of a person into becoming all that God meant them to be. I believe that the greatest gift that mothers or those who play motherly roles can give their children—no matter whether the person is a toddler, elementary school child, teen, young adult, in middle age, or even a senior—is to speak out against fear so that they might blossom into everything that they are meant to be. The most important work of mothers or those playing motherly roles is to say DO NOT BE AFRAID!

As mothers, or those who play mothering roles, our job is to instill courage in the place of fear, to be EN-COURAGERS! Unfortunately, all too often, we can unintentionally cultivate an atmosphere of fear. While we do need to protect our children from harm, especially when they are young, we can be overly protective. The message we often give our children is that it’s a dangerous world! I will keep you safe. Don’t do this! You might get hurt! Don’t go there! It is unknown territory. Don’t play in the yard! You might get Lyme disease. Don’t leave the house at all during the pandemic! You might get

Covid-19. Don't take that AP class! You might not do well and it will bring down your GPA. Yes, I know you love art (or philosophy) and it is your passion but don't major in it in college because you might not be able to get a job. Don't take flying lessons! Your plane might crash. Don't do a semester abroad! You can't trust foreigners. Be careful! Watch out!

In wanting the best for our children and in trying to keep them safe, we project our own anxieties and fears onto them. They then internalize our fear and become fearful themselves. And this fear paralyzes them and keeps them stuck, preventing them from blossoming and becoming all that God intends them to be. Is life about safety and security? Or is life about passion and risk? Is life about survival? Or is life to be an adventure?

I remember that there came a moment in my own parenting when I realized that I was cultivating an atmosphere of fear and anxiety through my vigilance and helicopter-like overprotectiveness. I thought that I was being a loving, good parent by my constant concern about safety and security. But in a sudden epiphany—the exact date was December 19, 2002—I realized that I was transferring my own fear onto my daughter and that, in so doing, I was preventing her from growing into her own soul, from becoming the magnificent work of art that God had created her to be. The message that I was giving was “It’s a dangerous world. I will keep you safe.” In other words DON’T BLOOM! The prayer that I had been saying every night was: “Keep Rachel safe and in your care.” But, after I realized my mistake in parenting, I tried to change the message that I was giving to: “It’s a friendly universe. Bloom and become everything that God created you to be! I will encourage you as you listen to the voice deep within.” Yes, I still prayed for her safety. But I began to release her more and more over into God’s care, visualizing her hand being placed into the hand of God, as I myself sought to live into the words of King David in Psalm 27:1 that *“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”* (Ps. 27:1)

This foundational Biblical message of not being afraid does not mean that our children and grandchildren will not confront numerous challenges and fearful realities in their lives. Of course they will! But God promises not to abandon them in fearful circumstances but to walk with them through the dark nights of fear, danger, and uncertainty. This is the message that we must pass on to our children. We must instill courage in them. That is the meaning of En-Couragement.

This “Little Parable for Mothers” by the American novelist and short story writer Temple Bailey illustrates this so well. It goes like this:

The young mother set her foot on the path of life. “Is the way long?” she asked.

And her Guide said: “Yes. And the way is hard. But the end will be better than the beginning.”

But the young mother was happy and she would not believe that anything could be better than these years. So she played with her children and gathered flowers for them along the way, and bathed them in the clear streams, and the sun shone on them, and life was good, and the young Mother cried, “Nothing will ever be lovelier than this.”

*Then night came and storms, and the path was dark, and the children shook with fear and cold, and the Mother drew them close and covered them with her mantle, and the children said: “Oh, Mother, we are not afraid, for you are near, and no harm can come,” and the Mother said, “This is better than the brightness of day, for I have taught my children—**Courage.**”*

And the morning came and there was a hill ahead, and the children climbed and grew weary, and the Mother was weary, but at all times she said to the children, “A little patience, and we are there.” So the children climbed, and when they reached the top, they said, “We could not have done it without you, Mother.”

*And the Mother, when she lay down that night, looked up at the stars, and said, “This is a better day than the last, for my children have learned fortitude in the face of hardship. Yesterday I gave them courage. Today I have given them **strength.**”*

And the next day came strange clouds which darkened the earth—clouds of war and hate and evil—and the children groped and stumbled, and the Mother said, “Look up—lift up your eyes to the Light.”

*And the children looked up and saw above the clouds an Everlasting Glory, and it guided them and brought them beyond the darkness. And that night the Mother said, “This is the best day of all, for I have shown my children—**God.**”*

And the days went on, and the weeks and the months and the years and the Mother grew old, and she was little and bent. But the children were tall and strong, and walked with courage.

And when the way was rough, they lifted her, for she was as light as a feather. And at last they came to a hill and beyond the hill they could see a shining road and golden gates flung wide.

And the Mother said, "I have reached the end of my journey, my children can walk alone, and their children after them."

And the children said, "You will always walk with us, Mother, even when you have gone through the gates."

And they stood and watched her as she went on along, and the gates closed after her. And they said, "We cannot see her, but she is with us still. A Mother like ours is more than a memory. She is a Living Presence."

<https://www.famqstudiolab.org/mothers-parable-by-bailey>

Closing Prayer: God, today we thank you both for mothers and all those who play mothering roles in our lives, knowing that this is the most difficult and important job in the world. As we do so may we walk out in faith and not in fear, strengthening the lives of all those who have been entrusted to our care as we seek to help them bloom and thrive as they become everything you would have them be. In the name of Jesus, whom God blessed with the amazingly strong mother Mary, we pray. Amen.