

## What is the Meaning? Created for Courage

Tony and Jo Ann

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TONY

Wow... this period of social distancing and quarantining sure has given new emphasis to the idea of being “connected,” hasn’t it? For many right now, “connected” means having an internet service provider! I found a report that surprised me... it says that of the 7.77 billion people in the world, 4.54 billion are active internet users. 4.5 billion! 90% of US residents are online now. About 100% of adults under 30, but only 73% of those over 65. I bet that number’s getting higher every day right now! :)

Well, we are able to “meet” together like this because of the blessings of the internet. (There are “curses”... detriments... to it also!) But we also know that connection means something more than merely having a broadband connection. That’s why we’re doing a special series this month to ponder stuff like what we noticed last Sunday... that we are created for connection. We long to love and to be loved, to connect and belong... because that’s what we were created for... for life-giving relationship with God and each other. We will never be fulfilled in this life without it. And the good news is that God IS Love... God created us in Love and for Love... and God has, and will always, love us.

And most of us know that... at least in our heads. We can sing the songs, maybe even quote the bible verses...like “for God so loved the world”... but knowing all about God doesn’t mean having a personal relationship with God. I can know everything about Prince Harry... including every detail of his life with Meghan Markle. I can be just absolutely wild about Harry! :)... but I still wouldn’t personally know him. How many Christians do the same thing with God?... know in their heads that God loves them... but don’t actually feel God’s love? Don’t actually experience God personally, in relationship? So, if this connection with God is what we were made for... if this is what we most deeply long for... if God truly wants us to share a love with him... then why is it that, so often, we don’t we feel loved by God?

JO ANN

Because, put plainly, most of us just don’t trust love. We’re afraid of vulnerability and intimacy... and on a deep level it appears we’re afraid of love itself! We’ve all been there, done that... put our hearts out there... and been deeply wounded. As a result, we would just rather not feel that kind of pain again, thank you very much. Whether it happened as a child, teen, adult... or all of the above... we risked loving... and received hurtful, critical responses in return... messages that we were unacceptable as we are... not good enough to be loved back.

We say to ourselves, “I don’t ever want to feel like that again! I’m going to protect myself... I’m going to hold my deepest self safely inside... and not trust anyone... only myself.” Sometimes this is conscious... sometimes not... but in either case, so often, the pain of vulnerably loving can trigger a fear of love itself. So rather than staying open to God, others, life, and ALL that authentic love brings... both pain AND joy... disappointment AND satisfaction... rejection AND embrace... uncertainty AND confidence...

... we settle for safety... for what we can control, earn, or deserve... what we can do in our own strength. We settle for surviving, not thriving... and make due with the limited existence fear allows us. And all the

while, deep inside, the sense of dissatisfaction... the fear, anxiety... AND the desire for the peace, rest, acceptance that only love can give... continues to gnaw at us...

TONY

That's what happens even in ordinary, "normal" life. And what happens when the world feels out of control, when our lives feel like they're beyond our control? That is what billions, including ourselves, are feeling now. And so we are afraid. But what do we mean by that? What is fear anyway? Is it always a bad thing? It's one word that means some very different things, and the distinctions are necessary, so we can pay attention to what's going on inside of us, and to what God is wanting to do in... and for us.

First, there's what I'm calling "rational fear." This is a necessary, mature, healthy response to things that are real concerns. It's why we don't walk out in front of traffic, run with scissors, or meet in large groups while there's a global pandemic. :) If you feel any of that rational fear, good for you! The question, of course, is what we do with our fears, but we'll get to that a bit later...

Then there is also what we might call "obsessive fear." This might have roots in rational fear but it goes beyond that. This is a fear that controls us, that tempts us to panic or go dark, that traps us in worst-case scenarios, that keeps us up at night, or is a phobia that keeps us from enjoying some of the joys of life. There's no shame in that... we all have these! ... but God does have something good to offer us.

But that means we need to deal with our fear of God. Many have been taught to be afraid of God, in part because early English translations of the Bible confused admonitions to stand in awe of God as commands to fear him! Yet the original biblical text is actually very clear that *God is love! Those who are living in love are living in God, and God lives through them. By living in God, love has been brought to its full expression in us so that we may fearlessly face the day of judgment, because all that Jesus now is, so are we in this world. Love never brings fear, for fear is always related to punishment. But love's perfection drives the fear of punishment far from our hearts. (1 John 4:16-18 TPT).*

God has *already* loved us... we don't need to earn it, prove it, or buy it... and love *continuously* drives out fear... particularly any fear of God's punishment, God's disapproval, God's anger. God does not want us to stand back from him in fear. What he desires, says David Benner, is "reverential intimacy." We will, yes, stand in reverent, adoring awe of the Holy One, but that same holy God wants us close enough to hear his heartbeat. He wants to look into our eyes and wants us to look into his...

JO ANN

...so that we can see who God really is... and what God's love is really like... and what God really wants in relationship with us. Because it is only experiencing THAT love that frees us to move courageously toward God, rather than away from Him.

And how does that courage happen? Paradoxically... through surrender. It's only when we experience for ourselves the safety of God's unconditional, inconceivably gracious love that we can let go of our fear and vulnerably receive. So... how did you respond when I said the word "surrender"? Probably like most people do... with some resistance... with images of waving a white flag... with feelings of being

overpowered, subdued, and shamed... maybe thoughts of having to show outward compliance and dutiful obedience to the one who forced our surrender...

But listen closely... although humans have treated each other this way... and bad theology has taught that this is the surrender God expects from us... THAT is not authentic Christian surrender at all! Surrendering to God's love is not bondage, but freedom from fear, guilt, and the exhaustion of having to earn everything in your own strength... Surrendering to God's love is not grovelling, but grace... freedom to receive love, rest, and the peace of letting God do what only God can do...

TONY

So let's look at a biblical story that illustrates what this kind of surrender can look like... in everyday life and especially in moments of real stress, like we're experiencing now....and the story just happens to involve a boat that's struggling to float. :) It's from Mark, chapter 6: *As soon as the meal was finished, Jesus insisted that the disciples get in the boat and go on ahead across to Bethsaida while he dismissed the congregation. After sending them off, he climbed a mountain to pray. Late at night, the boat was far out at sea; Jesus was still by himself on land. He could see his men struggling with the oars, the wind having come up against them.*

This occurs right after Jesus taught and fed thousands of people on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. The disciples hop on a boat to the opposite shore... not that far away. I was there this past summer, and could easily see from one side to the other. Jesus didn't go with them... he spent the night in reverential intimacy with God. And he watched them from his hillside. He saw the storm come through, and the wind whip up. He watched them wearing themselves out in the effort to row against it. They should have been home long ago! They were exhausting themselves in the struggle.

This is the same way he watches over you and me. "I see you," he says to us. "I am watching. I know what you're going through. I see the wind you're fighting against. I see your efforts and struggles. I know your fatigue and your fear." And he says all of that to us with utter compassion, not shame, not anger, not frustration. And, better yet!... he doesn't just sympathize from a distance... he steps in...

*At about four o'clock in the morning, Jesus came toward them, walking on the sea. He intended to go right by them....* This is a mistranslation... the last phrase in Greek means *either* to pass by or to *come to*. It was obvious from the previous sentence that Jesus was *coming to* them... that he was not merely out for a stroll across a sea in the middle of a storm at 4 am! He came to them in their distress... which, if you think about it, is the whole point of the incarnation... God came to us, to be with us, in our own distress.

Is that how you see God? How do you imagine God acting in your life, in your moments of distress? Is God far away in heaven looking down at you, but not emotionally or otherwise involved? Or is God maybe standing in a corner of the room, watching what you are doing and sympathizing, but still not acting? Or is God walking to you, on water if necessary, to join you in your distress?

JO ANN

The next verse shows that the last option is what Jesus chose... even though it caused his disciples a bit more distress before things got better: *But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and screamed, scared out of their wits.*

They weren't reacting any differently than we would have, right? We're all in the same boat at this point. :) Here they are... in the dark, in a fierce storm, waves crashing, rowing and getting nowhere... and then they dimly see a figure walking toward them... on the water!? As if the situation wasn't scary enough... here comes something else to be afraid of! And they were really, really afraid... so afraid the text uses the word "petrified" to describe them!

And I think it's fair to say that if we had been there, we'd have been petrified, too! :) It took them a moment to understand that what at first appeared to be a threat was actually their closest Friend... who was still doing something scary... in a marvelous, miraculous way. And look at how Jesus responds to them: *Jesus was quick to comfort them: "Courage! It's me. Don't be afraid."*

"Don't be afraid!" One of the most repeated phrases in the bible. Whenever something unexplainable happens... the usual first human reaction is fear. And God's usual first response is: "Don't be afraid!" But this verse offers more, revealing the motivation behind the words... "*Jesus was quick to comfort them.*" Jesus loved them and wanted to calm their fears... to show them that all was well... simply because He was with them. He is also very clear who He is... "It's me" ... Literally, "I Am."

None of those disciples would have missed Jesus' reference to the question Moses asked God at the burning bush: *When the Hebrew slaves ask me the name of the God who sent me, what should I say? God said to Moses, "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am has sent me to you.'" (Ex. 3:14)*

The wind is still raging, the waves are still crashing... and Jesus says, "*Oh by the way, the One who sent Moses to free your ancestors and parted the waters before them... is standing in front of you on this water right now!*" I am the compassionate One who has seen you in your exhaustion and bondage... and I want you to be free and whole... I am the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep! My heart is tender with love for you... let that penetrate your petrified heart! :)

And, oh my, when THAT reality DOES penetrate our frightened hearts... the reality that in Christ, THAT God is always with us... always loving us... always wanting to comfort and free and heal us... in the midst of whatever circumstances we find ourselves in... our closed hearts of stone really can begin to open to love again...

... and how does that happen? Jesus tells us... "Courage!" But what's so cool here is that He uses a word that means "be comforted... be emboldened to have courage." It refers to God's work of bolstering and comforting us with HIS good courage... Jesus is not saying, "*Get with it... be bold and daring in your own power!*" He is inviting them to trust God to provide what they need... as they allow themselves to be empowered and supported by Him. Jesus shows them that courage is not always taking hold of a situation with loud powerful action... but that courage can also be quiet abiding trust, that stands

unmoving like a mountain held by the earth beneath it... or like a boat, held securely by the water beneath it... even when that water is raging...

TONY

The story continues... *As soon as he climbed into the boat, the wind died down. They were stunned, shaking their heads, wondering what was going on.* They couldn't comprehend in their minds anything that was going on.... How is Jesus walking on water? Why is he even there with them? And how did that wind die down? This was still early in their following of him... and although they had seen some pretty marvelous things, they had not seen *this!* They were totally kerfuffled.

To live with courage means abandoning our need for and efforts to control... and risk trusting in God's love... to relax our tight grasp on our lives and other people... to let go of our self-reliance... and trust that in ways we cannot yet imagine, we will not fall, we will not sink, we will not be lost in the storm. Instead, we will float!... just like the boat was floating. There, in the early morning hours, when the wind had died down, there was stillness... peace... and, with Jesus in the boat with them, reverential intimacy. Their boat, our boat, simply rests on the quiet water, and the water is the power of God's love to hold us.

The point of the story is not that the wind died down, by the way. Strong winds would blow again... on every sea, in every life. The point was not what was happening around them... but who was with them. In that moment Jesus was showing them who God really is... and in this moment, in our own storm... he is showing *us* the same thing. The question is: Will we take the risk to trust it is really true?

Taking the risk to trust God's love ... that is courage. And it need not be a perfect courage, by the way. We don't get perfect courage overnight...if ever! And our imperfect courage doesn't take God by surprise. The disciples didn't have it. Just the day before, they had watched him feed thousands of people with a couple of fishes and some loaves of bread. They had seen it with their own eyes, and were amazed at the miracle, but the point of it had not yet sunk in...

*They didn't understand what he had done at the supper. None of this had yet penetrated their hearts.* That last phrase means literally that their hearts had been petrified. They were petrified with fear in the boat because their hearts had already been petrified by life, long before they began following Jesus.... hardened, unwilling to let go of trusting themselves in order to grab hold of the only One who is completely trustworthy. So here was an opportunity for them to open their hearts, to take this experience deep into their very souls, and live at least a bit differently... a bit more courageously.

And it's the same with us. We, too, have experienced some petrification of our hearts... which is why we are sometimes petrified by life. This current crisis is an invitation to look back with God over our lives... to see that God has always been with us, in the boat, in it all... loving us through all of it. That "graced history" gives us courage to risk trusting that with Him, we can also live into a "graced future."

JO ANN

And Jesus wasn't asking them, or us, to do something He wasn't willing to do Himself. Jesus' life is our example of what a willing heart and life looks like... When asked how to pray, Jesus showed his disciples

by praying Himself, "*Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*" It was more than words for Jesus... in every choice and action, Jesus chose what the Father wanted...

Today is Palm Sunday... the beginning of Holy Week... a time when we remember how Jesus courageously surrendered his earthly life to His Father's love... publicly weeping in compassion as He rode a donkey into Jerusalem, his vulnerable heart painfully longing for those who had no clue who He was or what He was about to do for them. And in Gethsemane He prayed in anguish to be released from the pain of what awaited Him... but somewhere in that intense struggle, Jesus risked again saying Yes to God... letting go and entrusting Himself to God's care... even as the soldiers came to arrest him... even as a friend betrayed Him with a kiss... even as most of His other friends abandoned Him... even as He was tried, tortured, and nailed to a cross... even as He felt all the suffering that humanity had or would ever feel... even with His last breath... Jesus was surrendered to love...

"Into Your hands I commit my spirit!" A prayer said by Jews of Jesus' time every day as part of their evening prayer. These were the last words on their lips before they closed their eyes and surrendered to sleep. These were the words that led them into peace, into rest, into the darkness... with hope that God would raise them to life again the next morning. The crowd hearing these words at the foot of Jesus' cross must have been confused... these were not the words of a dying criminal, a blasphemer who is getting what he deserves .... These are the words of a trusting child just before closing His eyes in the sleep of death. In complete trust... Jesus surrenders Himself into God's hands.

The crowd may not have understood, but as we watch Him gasping for air to speak these last few words, we can begin to see the amazing gift of courage He is offering us. Jesus assures us that no matter how deep the darkness grows ... no matter how much pain and suffering we endure in this life ... no matter how misunderstood or mistreated we may be ... no matter how hopeless circumstances may appear ... fear does not get the final word... despair does not get the final word... even death does not get the final word... because we have the choice... today and every day... about where we willingly entrust our lives.

We can continue to trust only in ourselves... and live fear-driven lives from petrified hearts... OR we can risk opening our hearts to Christ... letting them be penetrated by His comfort... filled with His compassion... held in the power of His love. David Benner writes: "*We are surrendering ourselves to God's unconditional and perfect love. In that perfect love we should relax and find rest. Surrender involves relaxing. Relaxing and letting go. It is floating in the river that is made of God's love. Floating is surrendering.*"

There are times when God asks us to step forward in courage... to do what we can do. But there are also times, like the days we are now living in, when we have done all that we can do... and God asks us to step back... so He can step in... and do what only HE can do. That's what Jesus did at the cross... "*It is finished!*" He cried... and His great heart physically broke open... as He surrendered, floating into the rest of God's perfect love... trusting that a new day would dawn... and He would be alive to greet it...

Let's close our eyes for a moment... allow the Holy Spirit to use your godly imagination... allow yourself to be in the boat in the midst of the storm with the other disciples. Let yourself see the waves crashing

all around you... taste the salt on your lips... hear the wind howling and the oars creaking under the weight of the water... feel the exhaustion in your body, the fear in your heart... and then in the murky darkness, you see someone walking toward you through the raging storm... Feel the adrenaline rush, your heart is pounding with even more fear... and then you recognize Jesus... He comes to the side of the boat and gets in, sitting next to you... The storm is calmed, it is quiet... it's just you and Jesus now... His eyes are full of tender compassion for you... wordlessly, you know He is wanting you to risk surrendering to His love... What does that mean for you? What would it look like in your life? What must you let go of in order to relax and float in His love? Are you willing to receive the courage you need?

We are going to pause for a moment as you pray... and also invite you to pause the recording or to come back to this prayer again and again during this Holy Week... and then Tony will close us...

TONY

The Avowal -- Denise Levertov

As swimmers dare  
to lie face to the sky  
and water bears them,  
as hawks rest upon air  
and air sustains them,  
so would I learn to attain  
freefall, and float  
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,  
knowing no effort earns  
that all-surrounding grace.

So, how are you floating? Are you more peaceful on your sea as a result of our time together? Or perhaps you might need to continue your conversation with Jesus. No matter what we are feeling... Christ is with us and will never leave. Here's a prayer that expresses whatever courage we have... or need... today... we'll read the "Leader" parts and you respond with the "All" parts, wherever you are....

LEADER: Lord, You have always given bread for the coming day;  
ALL: and though I feel poor, today I trust.  
LEADER: Lord, You have always given strength for the coming day;  
ALL: and though I feel weak, today I trust.  
LEADER: Lord, You have always given peace for the coming day;  
ALL: and though anxious of heart, today I trust.  
LEADER: Lord, You have always held us in love through trials;  
ALL: and now, tried as I am, today I believe.  
LEADER: Lord, You have always marked the road for the coming day;  
ALL: and though it may be hidden, today I believe.  
LEADER: Lord, You have always lightened this darkness;  
ALL: and though shadows surround me, today I believe.  
LEADER: Lord, You have always spoken when time was ripe;  
ALL: and even if you seem silent now, today I believe. Amen.