

***Lean In!***  
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**September 25, 2016**

**Matthew 10:17-31**  
**Joshua 1:1-9**  
**2 Corinthians 12:7-10**

We are now in week 3 of a 10-week series called "Next Steps," a series designed to help every follower of Jesus to take the next step of faith. We are all on the same path as we follow Jesus' teachings, his example; trying to do as he did and to love as he loved. But each of us is at a different place on that path – each facing different challenges at different times. So as we go through this series we are encouraging each of you to take *your* next step of faith – whatever makes sense for you as you respond to God's nudge in *your* life. Wherever you are on that path - beginning, middle or end -- there is a next step for you.

We are walking this path because of what God has first done for us. He has gone the extra mile, through Jesus' death on the cross. It is *because* we are loved, *because* we are saved, *because* we have been set free – that we now want to follow him. You have been freed from the power of sin and death; how, then, will you use your freedom? It's Jesus who has freed you; now, how will you follow him? Today, as you seek to take that next step, you might ask yourself: where is he leading? What's the point?

I'm reminded of a story told to us by a friend when he was a young father. He was teaching his small daughter how to cross the street, looking both ways before stepping out. So they stopped at the curb; looked both ways, and then proceeded to cross. As they walked he decided to drill her in this little lesson, asking, "What are we looking for when we look both ways?" And she looked up at him and answered confidently, "Bugs."

Well, she didn't quite get it. And maybe, as we follow Jesus, we don't always quite get it either. Sure, we want to follow Jesus, but where is he leading? What's the whole point? What is the payoff? Is it to become a better person? Is it to go to heaven after we die? Is it to have a trouble-free life?

Well, if you follow Jesus, you will likely become a better person. And because of his gift of grace, you have a place in Heaven. But our Scripture lessons for today tell us that just because you are a Christian, doesn't guarantee a trouble-free life. Quite the opposite. But here's the payoff: Jesus offers a faith so strong it frees you from the power of fear. He teaches you that there are times when, regardless of danger, you should *lean in*. That's a pretty bold statement. Lean in – to danger?

Fear is an issue for us. You might think, with all the advantages that we enjoy today because of medical science and technology, that people would be less afraid. We have made huge advances in tackling problems surrounding childbirth, infections, cancer and heart disease. We have improved security in airports and made better seatbelts in cars. But the fact is, we in the western world seem to be more afraid than ever. Blame it on the ever-present news or on social media – we have a lot of fears: identity theft, Isis, legal liability and hacking – just to name a few.

As a result, we seek ever greater safety and security. We buy extra insurance – not just for health or our cars – but even for our blenders and coffee makers! We've become risk-averse. Let

me take this closer to home: our children's safety. I remember, as a second grader, taking the bus across town by myself, to go to my piano lessons. Is it that much more dangerous, 50 years later? And yet, I can't imagine that happening today. In those days we seemed to have fewer fears, and so took more "risks." And maybe we learned to be more confident and less fearful, as a result.

Fear can be paralyzing. It can prevent you from loving deeply – because you might lose that person and suffer the crippling pain of loss. Fear can keep you from giving freely because it creates a scarcity mentality. You figure you only have so much and you don't want to lose it, so you become protective of your wallet. Fear keeps you from dreaming wildly because adventure is by definition, risky. But my friends, if you play it safe in all these ways – you will miss out on some of life's greatest blessings.

In our need to protect ourselves and those we love, we sometimes miss out. And worse, when protection becomes your #1 priority, your faith gets twisted. People often lose their faith because they perceive that God is not protecting them the way they expected. But let's be honest: in this life nothing is guaranteed; accidents, disease and disaster seem to strike at random. Christians stand the same chance of dying in a car accident as anyone else. Now, I want to be careful here. Does God protect and provide for you? Yes. In my own life, I have experienced God's protection and care many, many times. But is protection in this life God's #1 priority? No. This life will come to an end, for all of us. However we hedge our bets, whatever insurance policies we buy, we are still mortal and something's going to get us in the end. There is no guarantee in this world. Because God has a bigger picture in mind. An eternal picture. What God *has* done is to solve the bigger problems of sin and death. What God *has* done is to inject love and joy and hope into an otherwise doomed existence. God is always there for you, but sometimes not in the way you expect.

Our lessons for today show us that. Joshua faced real challenges as he led his people into the Promised Land. It wasn't handed them on a silver platter. They had to fight for it. Paul suffered beatings, imprisonment, storms and starvation in his mission work. God didn't prevent it. And in our Gospel lesson today, Jesus warns us, his followers, that we too, will face persecution and danger. Far from finding greater safety, following Jesus seems to catapult us into danger's way.

Life is full of trouble. Fear is a pretty natural reaction, given the circumstances. And yet, one of the most common phrases in Scripture is this one: "*Fear not!*" In our Gospel lesson alone, Jesus says it four times. Bottom line, "Do not be afraid of those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul." In our Old Testament lesson, we hear it again: *Have courage!* Joshua is facing real dangers but God says, "Be strong and courageous!" And he gives the reason: "The Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

So let's be clear. Fear can paralyze you. Fear can rob you of the blessings of loving, giving and dreaming big. Fear is your enemy. So Jesus wants to free us from fear, giving us courage instead. But he's not saying, "Don't be afraid; nothing bad will happen to you." Such a statement would lead to magical thinking. You would begin to think, "If I just pray; if I just read my Bible; if I try to be the best person I can be, then things will go right." That's magical thinking. That's

thinking: you find the right formula and you get the right result. But it doesn't work that way (does it?). God isn't into magic.

Jesus is saying, instead: "Don't be afraid WHEN bad things happen, because I will be with you." That leads to confident thinking. It leads to trust. Scripture is full of this kind of statement. Psalm 23: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, *I will fear no evil*, for you are with me." Psalm 46: "God is a refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. *Therefore we will not fear*, though the earth give way, and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging." The earth may fall apart, but we needn't fear. God is there with us.

*Be strong and courageous!* – God said to Joshua, in the face of trouble. Courage, my friends, is not the absence of fear. Courage is the willingness to face your fears and move forward. It's the willingness to *lean in* to trouble and danger, despite your fear – because you have a bigger goal to achieve. Athletes and first responders do this all the time. There's no way to score a touchdown but to lean in. There's no way to fight fire or crime without leaning in to face dangers along the way. You have to lean in. Trusting God gives you courage.

During a bombing raid of a big city a father, holding his small son by the hand, ran from a building that had been struck by a bomb. In the front yard was a shell hole. Seeking shelter as quickly as possible, the father jumped into the hole and held up his arms for his son to follow. Terrified and bewildered by the thick smoke, yet hearing his father's voice telling him to jump, the boy replied, "I can't see you!"

The father, looking up against the sky tinted red by the burning buildings, called to the silhouette of his son, "But I can see you. Jump!" The boy jumped, because he trusted his father. When you allow trust to overcome fear, you become courageous. God has carried you through difficulties in the past; he will do so again. You can trust him.

So what does this mean for you? What are *your* next steps on the fear/courage spectrum? We are all in different places on that path. And I don't want to minimize the dangers. I'm not throwing caution to the wind or advocating foolhardiness. But neither do I want to minimize the power of God to give you courage when you need it. So, where is God nudging you to greater courage, taking a risk, for a greater good?

If you don't want to miss out, you have to lean in! Grow Groups, Fish Food Pantry, Mercy Mobile, City Team, a conversation with a friend about faith – whatever it is for you – lean in! Jesus leaned in to the fray, and his suffering brought about the greatest possible good, the salvation of mankind. Don't miss out on what God has in store for you, an impact on his kingdom, however small.

Here's the bottom line. Jesus made this promise: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." Dear friends, *Fear not!* Trust God. And *lean in* to the life he has given you to live.