

Romans 8:14-17  
**“Forward Into God’s Embrace”**  
The Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift  
Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC, Roslindale, MA  
Pentecost Sunday, June 5, 2022

*The Readings: Romans 8:14-17*

*<sup>14</sup> For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. <sup>15</sup> For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ <sup>16</sup> it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup> and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ— if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.*

Our little two year-old granddaughter, Emma, likes to jump around, dance, and fall down on us like a toddler gymnast. But I have also noticed that she does *not* like to fall backwards. When this happens, it catches her by surprise, her eyes get wide in fear as she goes down, and then come the tears.

On the other hand, she has no problem running *forward* into her parents’ arms when she sees them, saying: “Daddy!” “Mommy!” While she is in *their* embrace, Emma even allows her head and body to lean back as they swing her around! She is safe and secure from all alarms.

I thought about Emma as I read Paul’s words about “falling back into fear” and “crying ‘Abba! Father!’”

In Romans 8, Paul is describing something that happens to us *spiritually*. He is teaching us about how the Holy Spirit operates and engages with our human spirits. The apostle does not seem overly impressed by the dramatic manifestations of the Holy Spirit in Acts, chapter two; he is impressed by how the Holy Spirit helps you and me in the regular course of living our faith day to day, what later Christians labeled as “the indwelling Spirit.”

**Since he writes about it, Paul must have also known something about what it is like to fall back into fear.** I speculate from what I know of him from the bible that Paul was afraid of not being justified before God. In other words, he didn’t want to be wrong or *do* anything wrong. We know that in his former life he was intent upon following the letter of the Jewish religious law and also upon condemning and persecuting others who didn’t. Before his conversion to Christ, he must have thought of God more as a righteous judge, always frowning upon his sins. So in those days Paul lived in fear of being *unrighteous*, and I think, even after he became a Christian, he found himself slipping into these old habits.

**What is “falling back into fear” for you?** During this pandemic, do you find yourself returning to a place of fear when the numbers surge? If you are grieving the loss of a loved one, has the unknown of the future gotten the better of you? Is it anger and blame that haunt your going forward? And who doesn’t stumble these days – especially survivors - upon hearing of still another shooting? Falling back into fear is not only an experience of individuals. Groups – a church or a nation – can go through periods when

their collective progress toward God's justice and peace is thwarted, and they become afraid.

It wasn't until I was 21 that I learned to drive a stick shift. Do you know that scary feeling when you are driving a stick shift car up a hill, and at its crest the light turns red? The physics are such that almost inevitably, when the light turns green, you are going to move a bit backward. It's tough to learn how to let out the clutch and step on the gas in such a way that you continue forward! In fact, you see that I can hardly explain *how* to do it right now! But it takes a greater force to offset the downward momentum.

**Well, Paul wants to help Christians and the Church of his day to go forward confidently, so he reminds them that they have access to the greater, spiritual force of the Holy Spirit.**

River Ridge Christian Church found this to be true. This big downtown church had been declining numerically and in morale since the 1960s. They sensed that they were 'falling back into fear,' but in the early 2000s, they listened to the indwelling Holy Spirit at several key junctures: 1) They did an intentional interim, not just a fill-in, and this helped them discern what they needed to change; 2) they embarked on a pastoral search to match this resolve; 3) their new settled pastor then took this work further and proposed the 140 x 140 Challenge: that they would adopt a vision statement, put the church building up for sale, move out into temporary facilities, focus on ministry to families, and achieve 140 people in worship by the congregation's 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary. They didn't say "no" right away. The lay leaders said that "after they had picked their jaws up off the table," one of them said: "Why *not*?" This was the 'uumph' of the Holy Spirit that they needed to get over 'the hill!'

Paul's own faith story is another testimony to the power of the Holy Spirit. When he met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, he was introduced to the *grace* of God. All his past sins against the church were forgiven, and he saw God differently.

It may have been his relationship with his own earthly father that helped him understand how the Holy Spirit would inspire him to go forward, but Paul conveys how the Spirit tells us that we are God's children, beloved, and like Emma, we can run eagerly toward our Abba and Imma, into the arms of the Divine! Thereafter, whenever Paul sensed himself backsliding into his old judgmental, perfectionist ways, the Holy Spirit called him forward into the arms of the One waiting for him in love.

In *your* case, it may not be your father or mother. Maybe, instead for you, God is like a dear friend, or an understanding family member. Or maybe it is a Godly *cause* that gives you the fuel to go forward with faith.

I think for the Kings, Martin Luther and Coretta Scott, it may have been their relationship with each other that served as the *reference point* for that with God. At least, the concept of the statue that is planned for the King Memorial in Boston Common suggests this. It is called "The Embrace," and it depicts their arms and hands hugging each other when he received the Nobel Peace Prize. Their love for each other, like the love of God, kept them both from falling back into fear. Plus their common quest for God's dream showed itself to be a sufficiently potent force to overcome the many challenges to it.

**You and I can be assured that the Holy Spirit that lives in us is calling and propelling us forward into *God's* embrace!**