

June 21, Ordinary 12A (Matthew 10:24-39)

Jesus keeps saying, “Do not be afraid.” But there’s so much to be afraid of.

by [Diane Roth](#) in the [June 17, 2020](#) issue

Several years ago we took our vacation Bible school children on a field trip to a place called Pump It Up! I hadn’t known that such a place existed. At first I thought it must be some sort of a bodybuilding experience, but in truth it is a kind of gymnasium full of inflatable sports equipment, from bouncy slides to basketball courts, obstacle courses, and bounce houses. I witnessed children of all ages throwing themselves into the equipment, bouncing as high and as hard as they could, running back and forth between play stations with big smiles on their faces.

For about an hour, the children could play as hard as they wanted to, jump as high as they wanted to, with as much energy and enthusiasm as they could muster—without any danger of serious injury. Everything is bouncy—and padded. There aren’t any hard surfaces to run into. And for extra measure, there were a few spotters wandering around the area, making sure that everyone was following directions and that all of the landings were soft ones. Everyone played fearlessly—because they knew no matter what they did, they could not really get hurt.

I found myself thinking, Wouldn’t it be great if life could be this way? We could set to the tasks, the responsibilities, even the fun of our daily lives with no hesitations or fears, because we would know that our landings would be soft ones.

In truth, we have no such reassurance—not even from Jesus, in this series of warnings and exhortations. He exhorts us not to be afraid, but he doesn’t promise there will be no hard surfaces to run into. He doesn’t promise that our decisions will not have consequences. Yet he exhorts his disciples to live fearlessly anyway.

But what does that look like? I'm writing this in April, when most churches have followed their community's official guidance to shut down in-person worship. A few pastors have defied such orders, framing it as a matter of courage and trust in God. Is this what Jesus means by living fearlessly and trusting that God will let no harm come to us?

For me, the turn from public worship was a hard one. At first I simply could not imagine not coming together for worship. "You are thinking of not gathering?" I asked another pastor. He said, "We've considered it." I was incredulous. If we are sick or particularly vulnerable, we should stay home. But the church has always gathered. How can we not gather? I could not imagine it.

And then, suddenly, within a day or so, I did imagine it. I believed it was necessary. As the news spread of exactly how contagious the virus was, we sent out letters, locked our doors, and put up signs that said that we would not meet publicly "until further notice." Later I would read stories of choirs that met, and how afterward many in the choir became sick—even though no one felt ill, no one shook hands, and they tried to be careful to stand far apart. It dawned on me that one of the things that I found most life-giving and faith-strengthening—singing—could spread the virus.

"What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light," says Jesus, "and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops." These words used to make me imagine the early Christians meeting in secret in the catacombs, in the darkness. Now I think about those words a different way.

There are just a few of us who gather on a Sunday morning—the minimum required to put on a service. We speak and sing and pray to an empty room, and it seems odd, what we are doing. One of us is recording, and I imagine the people in my congregation who are gathered in their living rooms, isolated in their homes as well. It all seems like the opposite of what Jesus is telling us to do, of who Jesus is telling us to be.

But then I think that it's not just me and three other people, and it's not just the families in my congregation huddled in their homes—because what we are doing is being shouted from the rooftops. We have no idea who is watching, no idea who is listening to our prayers and our songs and our shouts of faith. It takes courage, especially for churches that can't achieve professional production values, to go this

public with our proclamation.

The first week we tried online worship, one of our new members said she started a watch party with her father, who lives five hours away. She had not worshiped together with her father for many years. Former members who moved several states away told me later that they had joined from where they lived.

Do not be afraid, Jesus keeps saying, and I keep thinking that there is plenty to be afraid of. Life is not a bounce house. But we can be spotters, wherever we are. Because the world is full of sparrows, and God watches over every single one of them.