As a little boy, my son Connor loved to climb trees. Our yard in Ellicott City has abundant trees—a few really suitable for climbing. Big sturdy oaks planted decades before we moved in. Thick branches leading progressively to a canopy top of leaves one could peer through to survey the neighborhood. Plenty of rugged grooves in the bark for footholds. My son took advantage of all that, fearlessly scaling his way up toward the sky.

One day when Connor was about 10 years old, my husband Matt returned home from work, stepped out of his car in the driveway, and heard "Hey, Dad!" He looked around, but didn't see anyone. Then he heard it again, and identified the voice as Connor's. But he didn't see Connor anywhere. Knowing our boy, he began scanning the low branches of the trees in our yard, but he didn't see our son. So, he looked within the higher branches of those trees. Still, no Connor. Then, something made him look *higher*. And finally, he saw Connor, perched on the roof of our house, grinning and waving, quite pleased with his accomplishment.

Matt's heart jumped into his throat, as he was seized with horrifying visions of Connor falling off the roof. But he didn't want to startle our son, so he calmly walked over to the house and peered up, asking "How did you get up there?"

Connor pointed to the tree on the east side of our yard, the one my husband had commented numerous times about being *too close* to the house.

"I climbed up," Connor replied.

The next morning, I awoke to a very, very loud buzzing sound—it took me a moment to identify what it was. It was the sound of chain saw cutting into bark, my husband making sure that would *never* happen again.

As a boy, Connor climbed without fear. As parents, we know fear can be healthy. It helps us set boundaries, it helps us mitigate risk, it helps us keep our children safe.

But fear can also keep us from growth: in our relationships, in our faith lives, and in ourselves. It can sometimes cripple us emotionally. It's certainly easy to look at the events in our world today and see that happening, all across society. We are a people often consumed by fear.

Consider the scores of best-selling self-help books on the market about conquering our fears. Books like *Stop Fear From Stopping You*, *Willing the War in Your Mind*, and *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*. Consider that therapy in the U.S. is a nearly $10 billion industry. Consider the news we are exposed to every day. From natural disasters to war to poverty to violence, the world gives us much to be fearful about.

But what does Jesus teach us about fear?

Well, we can look at what today's Gospel reveals about this. Jesus takes a little child, wrapping him in his arms, holding him up for the disciples to see.

Popular interpretations point out that Jesus is emphasizing our call to care for the lowest and the least, which children of that time were considered. But beyond that, the Greek word for "little child" indicates a *very* little child, most likely an infant or a toddler. Probably a child who couldn't speak yet. In other words, this is a particularly vulnerable child, someone without a voice—completely dependent on others for his care. Children in that time were considered of low stature. But more than that, they were *vulnerable*, just as children are today. And because of

that, they are also trusting. They have not yet learned enough of the world to be consumed by their fears—and so they default to trust.

The question of trust emerges in Mark's Gospel when Jesus confronts the disciples, asking: "What were you arguing about?" Why does he ask this question, when he clearly knows the answer? For even as the disciples respond with silence, Jesus gathers them and says, listen, hear me and understand: *Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*

When Jesus asks the disciples what they're arguing about, he already knows. But in the midst of their quarreling and divisiveness, Jesus asks the disciples to *trust* him. He opens the door for them to confess their selfishness, to share their fears and anxieties, and to have an honest dialogue with their teacher, their brother, their Lord.

Unfortunately, the disciples are frozen by fear. As they peer upon the face of that tiny child in Jesus' arms, they may have been confused. Perhaps their faces burned with shame over how they'd been behaving.

Whatever the case, I wonder, what might have happened if the disciples had been willing to have that honest conversation with Jesus?

The fact is, there is nothing in our hearts or our heads Jesus doesn't already know. The good, bad, ugly, joyful, confused, scared: he already knows it all, and loves us still—yesterday, today, and always. And he invites us to share our fears with him, to trust him, and to grow in authentic relationship with him.

What kind of growth might we experience if we could have this kind of relationship with Jesus?

One area of growth might be in our discipleship. We might find ourselves more confidently leaning into our call to serve, sharing our gifts without fear that we won't have enough, that we won't be enough.

For the past month, I've been blessed to work with almost two-dozen members of our congregation in discerning a response to the Afghan refugee crisis. As tens of thousands of these refugees enter the U.S. in the coming months, we expect a number of them to settle in the Maryland/Virginia/DC area. With only 90 days of services guaranteed to them when they arrive, we know their ongoing needs, from housing, to mentoring, to transportation, to tutoring, will be tremendous.

In our discernment process, we reflected on scripture that spoke to the migrant's journey, we learned about the refugee experience, we considered who our neighbor is and what it means to welcome, and we explored our values and our strengths as a faith community.

We also acknowledged our fears and ambivalence around what kind of commitment Christ Church could realistically make, about whether we might get something wrong, and whether we might be taking on too much.

And though the discernment process left us with many lingering questions, we agreed as a group to move past our fears and commit to respond *in some way* to welcome and support the Afghan refugees who will soon be among our community. And we agreed to trust that despite our unanswered questions, our

continued discernment would lead us to full clarity on God's call for us, and to confidence that God will provide and prevail.

This new initiative is one of many ministries requiring our gifts of time, talent, and treasure. Christ Church does *a lot*. We give *a lot*. We give generously to support underserved children and families in our community. We are willing to have hard conversations around race and privilege, and to make a commitment to stand and fight racism in all its forms. We are willing to put ourselves out there to explore new ministries where we face numerous unknowns.

In so many ways, you all answer the call to serve those marginalized, oppressed, and persecuted in the world—truly diaconal work that emerges from our baptismal covenant. I look around Christ Church and feel truly blessed to be your deacon.

Ministry is hard work. New ministry is even harder. Will we spread ourselves too thin? Will we have enough resources to care for those within our parish as well as those outside it? Can we trust that we'll be able to welcome *all* in Christ's name? Knowing that he walks with us, that he provides when we ask rightly, that as a community serving through the Spirit, we can trust we will have enough, and we will be enough.

We *can* experience a more authentic relationship with God that allows us to share our fears and anxieties and move past them, living into God's call for our lives. We *can* reject fear and choose trust: an economy of grace that allows all to flourish, as James says, in the wisdom that "is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits..." wisdom that yields "a harvest of righteousness sown in peace for those who make peace."

As we explore new ministries and grow existing ones, as we each discern in the coming weeks how to personally give our time, talents and treasures to support all that Christ Church does, Jesus invites us to cast out our fears, and to trust.

He holds up a vulnerable little child, saying: *Do not fear. I wrap my arms around you. I walk beside you. I went to the cross so you can be free of the yoke of fear. Welcome in my name, serve in my name, love in my name.*

On our own as individuals, we are not enough, and we never will be. But as a community of believers, buoyed by the Holy Spirit and the power of Christ's example, we will always have enough to serve others, to walk with others, to follow Jesus' teaching: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

God takes our combined gifts and uses them for immeasurable good. Last will be first. The lowly will be lifted. The least will be greatest. This is the harvest of righteousness, the upside-down kingdom of heaven. As disciples of Christ, our role is to trust and humbly serve, to build up that kingdom.

My prayer this morning is that when we find ourselves frozen by fear, we may find the wisdom and courage to lay those fears at the foot of the cross, to share even our darkest fears with Jesus, and to engage in truly authentic relationship with him. *Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.*