



Webs Not Walls

Week 3: Weaving Webs

Brian Mattson - 08/30/2026

My wonderful mom is a lover of the natural world. She used to take us to streams on summer days to wade in the water and catch crawdads. We'd hike around the Nature Center or other great trails around the area, exploring the woods and wildlife. We visited and camped in many national parks growing up, soaking up the sights and sounds of those wild places. Enjoying the outdoors as a family are some of my greatest childhood memories. She is content there, happy to spend an entire day reading with a view, or nowadays, experiencing the outdoors anew with my kids.

She used to tell us all the time that if she could go back to college and get trained for a different career, she would've been a science teacher. I imagine she would've been a science teacher very similar to Ms. Frizzle from *The Magic School Bus* series. A little quirky, a little irreverent, but utterly entertaining.

She loves animals too, and we always had pets growing up. Dogs, cats, lizards, mice, guinea pigs. She has a dwindling collection of bug sculptures and figurines, as it seems my kids bring one home after nearly every spendover at Gigi and Papa's house. And one must really love nature if you have a bunch of miniature bugs around your house. Who does that? My mom, that's who. Maybe Julianne Lampert or Linda Chorce, but those are about the only other people I could think of who would do it.

But one of the most Ms. Frizzle-like things about my mom is that she is a self-avowed spider-sniffer. I know that sounds strange, and honestly it feels a little strange to say it out loud, but it's true. My mom is a spider-sniffer. There I said it, it's off my chest. What that means is still a little unclear to our entire family even to this day. All I really know is that it is part Mattson Family Lore now, and it all stems from a Girl Scouts leader training campout seminar thing. Like I said, the details are fuzzy. Ask her about it sometime, I'm sure she'd love to regale you all with the story.

I, however, never inherited her admiration for spiders. I very much dislike them. They seemingly appear out of nowhere to scare me—in my car, on the couch, in my bed! They give me the ick. Stay away, spiders. Jessica is the spider-killer in our house. I take care of the snakes, she takes care of the spiders.

And their webs are so annoying. And never ending. I can see them in the corner of our ceilings, draped across a chandelier, and covering bushes in the fall. They brush across my face on hikes or even when I mow the lawn. I like to keep my distance from those spiders and their webs, but I must admit they are fascinating and intricate creations, quite varied in their appearance. Of the more than 51,000 species of spiders on earth, about half of them make webs of some kind. The webs fall into four main categories—funnels, orbs, sheets, and tangles—and are made of up to seven different kinds of silk the spiders can produce of varying strength and tackiness depending on the spider's needs. And all this underlying information explains why a spider's web is a better analogy for the faith we are trying to build rather than a wall.

In the modern philosophy era, a period that stretches from the middle of the 17th century to the middle of the 20th century, knowledge was viewed as a structure that we could build; a building or a cathedral. Things changed in the postmodern era as philosophers started using a different visual to describe knowledge—a web. Here's author Merdith Miller.

In a web, the things we know are like the strands, all interconnected rather than being built on top of one another. There are still anchor points that hold the web in place, but the structure is flexible, pliable, able to endure stress and even certain amounts of breakage while still surviving.

- Meredith Miller

That's the beauty of looking at our faith like a web—it can handle a little stress and adversity and remain tethered to its anchor points, even if small repairs are necessary at times. If we are trying to build our faith like a wall, one brick stacked at a time, layer upon layer of facts and knowledge, what happens when something is wrong with a brick? What happens if a crack forms, stairstepping up the wall, creating an unstable fissure?

This has been a common occurrence for many people over the last 20 years, but it goes back much further than that. People built impressive walls of faith with systematic theology and logical precision. But then new information was discovered or new people were introduced and certain bricks that had been laid didn't seem to fit anymore. They either needed to be ignored or removed. Ignoring the now-misaligned bricks, which cause more cracks, is the old ostrich with its head in the sand defense mechanism. And trying to do structural repair by taking out more bricks can cause the whole thing to crumble. Here's Meredith Miller again:

The problem with seeing our faith as a wall is that when one of the stones gets exposed as not being true, or not being true in the way we thought it was, we think we need to tear the whole thing down and start over again. Worse, unless we're really good at ignoring reality, the wall falls whether we want to tear it down or not. We find ourselves standing amid the rubble of our former faith, wondering how we will ever rebuild.

- Meredith Miller

We have a word for that nowadays—deconstruction. Many of you have gone, or are going through it, and maybe you are still wondering how to reconstruct. Well rather than just building another wall, let's learn from spiders—the great architects of nature. Their webs are intricate, complex, seemingly fragile, yet comparatively strong. Miller says they are the spider's way “of adapting to the endlessly complex, maddeningly unpredictable, frighteningly unstable world.” That's what makes them helpful analogies for our faith.

Our world is not linear, nor stable, just like the spider's reality. And in an ever-changing world, resilience and flexibility are vital components of a healthy faith. But to create a web that can withstand the elements, we need to attach it to something at least. A web doesn't float. It is not simply carried on the wind. It's attached to something, or rather some things. Here's what Miller says about building our webs of faith:

Anchor threads affix to who God is, including the attributes that live in mysterious, dynamic tension with one another. Internal threads—habits; less essential, but still important beliefs; faith practices; life rhythms—give our faith its unique shape...A web is designed with the expectation that strands will break, and with resources for repair.

- Meredith Miller

I love this image. We affix our faith, the underpinnings of our beliefs, on what we know to be true of God, the Spirit, and Jesus the Messiah. For too long, Christians have built a faith on individual interpretations of scripture. We've seen literal absolutes when we should've seen figurative beauty. We saw Jesus change lives with power and influence, and so we sought authority for ourselves, seeking pride instead of humility. We listened as Jesus pointed out sin and injustice, and so we felt the need to condemn other people, casting others aside instead of drawing them close. So instead of my personal interpretation, perhaps I need to remember what is true about God, and

anchor my faith onto those things. The promptings of the Spirit and the teachings of Jesus are trustworthy and true and good. Those are my anchor threads. Those are the strands that help give shape and hold up the rest of my web of faith.

The internal strands—the traditions, songs, good works, and various beliefs and theories—provide individuality and decoration. These internal threads may break and need to be repaired and re-anchored, but the whole structure doesn't come apart. It is less likely that the anchor threads will break and detach, but if they do, because of all the other threads working together, the web doesn't come undone completely. Again, resilience and flexibility are key, for the spider and us.

As tension is applied and strands break, which is inevitable in life, we can re-attach and rebuild as needed. But repairing a few strands of a web is completely different than constructing an entirely new one. We will run out of energy quickly if that becomes a regular occurrence. And to make sure our webs can survive the most stress, our anchor strands need to be well-fastened.

This is a similar sentiment that Jesus reiterated to his disciples during their final hours together. In John 15, just a few hours before he was arrested, he talked to his disciples about staying close to him; close to the Father:

I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can't produce a thing. Anyone who separates from me is deadwood, gathered up and thrown on the bonfire. But if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon. This is how my Father shows who he is—when you produce grapes, when you mature as my disciples. I've loved you the way my Father has

loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at home in my love. That's what I've done—kept my Father's commands and made myself at home in his love.

- John 15:5-10 MSG

Close contact, anchor points, with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit are the ways our faith can absorb the disruptions of life. Those relationships allow for flexibility on the inner part of the web. And that's not a model that Jesus commanded, rather he embodied it. Through constant prayer, meditation, and doing good works, Jesus showed what an active faith, anchored to God, looked like. William Barclay writes this in his commentary:

The secret of the life of Jesus was his contact with God; again and again he withdrew into a solitary place to meet him. We must keep contact with Jesus. We cannot do that unless we deliberately take steps to do it.

- William Barclay

Jesus didn't create more walls and boundaries, as the religious elites were doing. He stayed close to God and did as God commanded—love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. Those were the things that mattered the most to the Father and Jesus helped the people reinterpret those old laws. Do you think he added a little tension and stress to the walls of the Jewish religious crowd? You bet he did. He created lots of little cracks and pointed out malformed bricks, because the Pharisees and Sadducees were more concerned with laws and interpretations, rather than God's love.

That's what this series is all about—anchoring ourselves to God. And for our faith to absorb this ever-changing life and our new understandings of space, physics, humans, and history, we must attach ourselves to God's truths. Over the next four weeks, we are going to do just that. Practically, maybe

mystically, perhaps even effervescently, who knows. Our goal isn't to build a doctrinal wall, practicing systematic theology placing bricks higher and wider. Rather, we are finding, or rediscovering the core parts of God that we can anchor our faith onto. We hope it will be full of real life, practical applications that give more meaning and purpose to your days. Because what we are *not* doing is building walls. That was part of the problem in years past. We were building our faith in the wrong way. It didn't matter what medium we were using for our bricks, the design was wrong. We aren't trying to replace conservative Christianity with progressive Christianity, nor literalism with allegory. Those aren't the goals. We are re-discovering and reconstructing a different kind of faith. One that looks a little more like a spider's home, as much as I despise those little guys.

And through our web weaving we hope you will learn something new about your faith. We hope there will be nuggets of wisdom that you can pass on to your kids, your friends, your family. Those other webs that you'll help form might not look exactly like yours; no two are alike—both spider webs *and* faith. That's okay. That's good. There are lots of different people out there and lots of different spiders. But the things we anchor those webs on are the important things. God's love, justice, mercy, compassion, joy...and most of all our relationship with Jesus.