

CALL IT COURAGE

(05/28/17)

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 27
John 14:1-4, 15-20, 25-27

*“May Thy rich grace impart
Strength to my fainting heart.”* (“My Faith Looks Up to Thee” vs. 2)

This is Memorial Day weekend. It feels especially poignant this year with all that is going on in the world, not only the battle for control of the Middle East, Afghanistan, and north Africa but also the recent terrorist bombing at the Ariana Grande concert in Manchester, England an assault that leaves us all feeling both wounded and vulnerable. Then again, there always seems to be something going on in the world. This is why Memorial Day is such a meaningful holiday; it is a secular holiday that embodies existential themes, themes that are of religious significance. It leads us to think about some of the fundamental values of human life.

On Veteran’s Day we remember those who served, and on Memorial Day we especially honor those who gave their lives in the service of their country. Actually, they served and gave their lives not only for their own country, to protect our freedom, but also to defend the freedom and human rights of countries and peoples smaller and weaker than we, countries that could not defend themselves against the forces of an oppressor. Today I would like to lift up one part of their experience and reflect on it as a part of life and of our lives: the matter of courage and how courage relates to our Christian faith.

Because I was born in 1942, I have few actual memories of World War II. My dad was stationed on an aircraft carrier in the Pacific. Since I was only three years old when the war ended, I didn’t grasp the significance of his absence, the danger he was in, and how difficult it would have been for my mother and me if he had never returned. Later on in life I was able to read his letters and listen to his many stories about the war.

Actually, there weren’t many stories; there were only a few, but he told them many times. He never talked about actual battles. He talked about the deep friendships that were forged between men who went through battle together. He talked about a religious experience he had one night while standing watch on the bridge. And he talked about the importance of courage, the kind of courage that is not the absence of fear but the mastery of it.

I have never been through anything like a war. As a young boy, however, I did understand the importance of courage. My favorite book as a child, entitled *Call It Courage*, was the story of a young South Sea Islands boy, the king's son and hopefully heir, who was afraid of the water. When you live on an island, it is not a good idea to be post-traumatic aquaphobic. To make a long story short, the young boy eventually musters enough courage to set out on a night sea journey in a small boat. I must have read this book at least twenty times.

When I discovered this story I was probably in the 7th or 8th grade. I was just entering adolescence, which is a crucial time in identity formation. I had no idea that a powerful dynamic in adolescence is having the courage to engage in the process of separation and individuation: beginning to separate from your family of origin and step out into the world, and also individuating, becoming your own person. All I knew was that I liked reading the story of this young boy who, though he was terribly afraid of the water, secretly made his own dugout canoe and, under cover of night, set sail out into the terrifying unknown.

It was only later when I began to understand the role of archetypal dynamics in shaping psychic development that I began to understand that the story was about the archetype of the hero. It was about the courage it takes to face your own fears. It was about doing something that will make your father proud of you. It was about struggling against obstacles and, in overcoming them develop the qualities you need to become a man, to become a leader, to make your unique contribution to your tribe. All I knew is that the story touched me; it moved me; and it challenged me in ways I did not totally understand.

I now believe that this story awakened the archetype of the hero within me. In identifying with the protagonist, I took on both his fears and his challenges. I did not need to set out to sea in a dugout canoe, but I would need to leave home to go away to college. I needed to find out what I wanted to do with my life, what I felt called to do, and do the hard work to make this happen. I needed to take on the challenges of life: getting married, building a career, becoming a father, providing for my family, and doing graduate study while I was working full time or a little more than full time.

The book, which was about courage, helped to awaken the capacity for courage within me. It also taught me that there are different kinds of courage. It took a certain kind of courage

for the young boy to confront violent storms and hostile enemies while he was out at sea. It took a different kind of courage for him to face his own fears and conquer them.

This morning I would like us to think about courage not only in terms of the sacrifice of the men and women who have served and who presently serve in our armed forces, but also in terms of the courage that is needed to face the battles of everyday life, the courage that we shape the lives of ordinary, everyday people, people like you and me.

Many of the Bible stories we read as children were lessons in courage. We learned how David, the little shepherd boy, volunteered to fight the giant, Goliath, and how he killed his adversary with a single stone thrown from a sling. This story taught us that no matter how daunting the challenge may be, with God's help we can be victorious. As David later wrote,

*The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?*

The story of David and Goliath taught us that even children can be brave, that there are times when even young people need courage to face some obstacle.

I am well aware that young people nowadays are growing up with a totally different set of challenges than I had when I was their age. I don't remember classmates who suffered from panic attacks or other forms of anxiety, who suffered from depression, who were tempted to withdraw from life into the blissful euphoria of drugs. I am also well aware that I was born privileged: a white, lower middle-class male from an intact family with two loving parents who planted the seeds of religion and life-long learning deep within me. I was never bullied in high school, like the young woman on our prayer list who suffered brain damage from the abuse. I was teased a little by my friends, who were probably jealous because I was so handsome, because all the girls liked me, because I was a good athlete and an excellent student. (I actually just made all of that up—but the point of how relatively easy my life was compared to kids from all the different minority groups is still valid.)

While we are thinking about how children need to be brave nowadays, let me tell you about one of my current heroes. This young man's name is Gavin Grimm. Gavin, who was born in a female body, was 15 when he introduced himself to his classmates in his high school in Virginia as the boy he knew himself to be.

Now you might think that is enough of a challenge—to come out to your parents, your family, and then your friends as transgender. However, Gavin also wanted to go to the bathroom from time to time when he was at school. Unfortunately for him, Virginia is one of those states like North Carolina and Texas where you need to show your birth certificate before you use a public restroom. It's not enough that you feel male, look like a fifteen year-old boy, and perhaps even have undergone the hormonal treatments and corrective surgeries to make you anatomically male; you have to go to the restroom of the gender that is listed on your birth certificate.

Gavin, quite understandably, thought that it was unfair that he was forced to use the girls' restroom. So he sued his school district claiming that their decision violated Title IX, which prohibits sex discrimination in schools that receive federal funding. This made Gavin the poster child for a dirty and shameful debate about transgendered people's rights to exist in public spaces without experiencing hostility, harassment and violence. The lawsuit, as far as I know, has not yet been resolved.

I think Gavin is a hero because he is not fighting just for himself. He is fighting for those who are unjustly deprived of the sense of belonging that so many of us, and certainly I from my privileged status in life, take for granted. People like Gavin should not have to hide or go away, should not have to pretend that they are someone other than who they authentically are. They need our love, but they also need our support. I give Gavin and people like Gavin a lot of credit. I think they are examples of a very deep and very special kind of courage.

Just as an aside, I think our church has solved the problem of where transgendered people of either sex should go to the bathroom. Our church, which is a small church, only has one bathroom. Just last week when I was at Brandeis University I saw a unisex restroom sign that depicted the traditional female with a dress, the traditional male with pants, and then a person with half a dress and half pants. I thought that was very creative! We could use something like that in our church! If you only have one bathroom you bypass the issues of sex or gender, of male and female bathrooms, and get back to what the place is all about—elimination and personal hygiene. We in this church solved that problem long before it became a national debate!

There are many stories of courage in our Bible. Abraham had to be brave to set off on his journey into the wilderness. Joseph was probably scared when his brothers threw him into the

pit and when he was in prison in Egypt. Daniel needed courage when he was in the lion's den, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego when they were placed in the fiery furnace.

Jesus had to be brave to walk into Jerusalem, knowing he was going to be crucified. His disciples needed to tap into a reservoir of courage to preach the gospel even when it cost them their lives. Steven was stoned to death; Paul was beheaded; and Peter was crucified upside down. These stories and the stories of the saints and martyrs through the centuries are a source of inspiration to us because, although we will probably never be persecuted for our faith, we face daunting challenges in our own lives.

Courage is more than will power. Courage is a matter of the heart. This is where it is tied to our Christian faith. The word courage is derived from the French word *coeur*, which means heart. As we heard in our scripture reading from the 27th psalm, "be strong, and let your heart take courage." This strength, this courage, comes from waiting on or attending to the Lord.

Many of us need courage to face the difficulties of our everyday lives. Our challenge may be a life-altering change that was forced upon us, a change in our life situation which we did not choose and which we would not have chosen. Our challenge may be the challenge of adjusting to the infirmities of old age, the gradual loss of sight or hearing that makes our world much smaller and our need to depend on others much greater. Our challenge may be our struggle with a serious and potentially fatal illness. Our challenge may be our need to make a difficult decision. Whatever the situation, we need to draw from the same resources that David and Joseph and Daniel and Jesus drew from. We need to draw from the resources for living that have been given to us by God.

What factors plant the seeds of courage within us, that help to strengthen our hearts to face the challenges of our everyday lives? First we need hope. When we lose a sense of hope, when we feel helpless and hopeless, our heart fails within us.

Second, we need to know that people care. Many people have told us how comforting it is to know that their name is on our prayer list. They tell us that just knowing that people care enough to say a short prayer for them every day gives them the strength, the courage to face their illness. Just as we can draw strength from hope, from a vision of how our situation might change for the better, so also we can draw strength from the knowledge that we are not alone.

Third, and most importantly, we need to let God enter our hearts. This is what we do when we pray; we open our hearts to God. When God enters our hearts, our hearts are strengthened. As the words of so many of our hymns remind us, God will give us grace for every trial. Though our weary steps may falter, a spring of joy will gush forth from the Rock. This is the source of courage, the courage we need to face the difficult circumstances of our lives.

We may not need the kind of courage that is needed to fight in a war or set out to sea in a canoe. But, like the people who are on our prayer list, we may need courage to face every day.

God grant that through our worship and prayer, through our faith and our experience of community we may become more authentically the persons that God intends us to be, and our hearts may be strengthened to face the struggles of our life now and in the days to come.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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