

## The Church as a School of Courage

Ps. 31:24; John 16:33; Daniel 3:13-18; Esther 4: 12-14

Let's talk about courage! And the church as a school of courage. It is one of the seven classical virtues: Wisdom, Courage, Justice, Temperance, Faith, Hope and Love. I would preach on Temperance but no one would come.

At the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris there are two rows of stone sculptures by the massive front doors. They depict the virtues and vices. For courage there is a woman holding a shield emblazoned with a lion. Below, depicting cowardice is a man running from a rabbit.

In *The Wizard of Oz* Dorothy meets a lion in search of his courage. We feel his pathos. What is a lion without his courage? But courage is important to us humans too. Maya Angelou has said that without courage none of the other virtues are possible. This is true. They all take courage, and all need courage to be sustained.

At its heart, *courage is the inner strength to be who God created us to be and who God is calling us to be.*

Courage was defined by Plato as the courage of a soldier. It defended the city-states from attack. The word for it in the Greek was *andreia*, literally “manliness”. The Latin word for courage was *fortitudo*, “strength”. Both words seem high in testosterone.

It is highly significant that the Bible’s word for courage has less to do with “manly strength” and more to do with the heart. Strength of heart. “Be strong and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord”. (Psalm 31:24). In the New Testament the normal Greek word for courage is nowhere used. Instead the phrases used have to do with strength, heart, boldness of speech and action, the endurance of faith and hope. “In this world”, Jesus said, “you will face tribulation. But be of good courage; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33) Interestingly, the English, French and German words for courage all have to do with the word for heart.

At its first, most elemental level it is courage in the face of pain, injury and death. A nation is protected by the courage of its soldiers. But courage is more than a military virtue. Often the virtue of courage is divided into “physical courage” and “moral courage”. We are talking here about “physical courage”, but it goes far beyond the courage of a soldier. G.K. Chesterton remarked that we would not be born but for the courage of mothers. Courage is needed by every woman as she endures the physical dangers of pregnancy and walks through

death's shadow to bring forth life, to bring forth *us*! Courage is the virtue of a teacher shielding her students from gunfire, of fire-fighters and police officers. During this pandemic we have seen the courage of healthcare professionals and now the courage of teachers who brave the classroom that students might learn. It is the virtue of a man diving into the sea to save a drowning person. Where do we get such courage except from God?

## II

Now we turn to moral courage. Moral courage is *the strength to hold fast to what is right in the face of temptation, injustice, social ridicule and persecution.*

This reminds us of an important truth. While every virtue needs courage to survive, courage needs the other virtues to be true courage. Without the other virtues courage is merely recklessness, rashness, fool hardiness, bravado. There is sometimes a thin line between being a "fool for Christ" and a damn fool.

Courage faces danger, derision and exclusion for a just, good and loving cause.

## III

Daniel is probably the most memorable hero of courage in the Bible. Taken from his home as a teenager he was brought to Babylon where he was taught and trained in the Babylonian court. He was assigned a Babylonian name,

Belteshazzar. And he was fed at the King's table of rich and non-kosher foods. He said yes to the name but no to the diet. He didn't say no to everything. If courage is the strength to say no, wisdom knows when to say yes and when to say no.

Daniel's most famous episode of courage was when he refused to stop his daily public prayers when told if he didn't he would be thrown to the lions. He stayed steadfast in his prayers and was thrown into the lions' den. We know the end of the story. When the King came down the stairs the next morning to see what was left of Daniel, there he was, playing with them like they were a bunch of kittens in a cat food commercial. "An angel shut their mouths", said Daniel, but the old line is also true: "The lions couldn't eat him because he was all backbone!"

And let's not forget his three young friends, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego". One day the king built a huge golden idol of the Babylonian god and commanded all to bow down to the golden image. If they did not they would be thrown into the fiery furnace. The golden image probably looked suspiciously like the king himself. This is how the three young men responded:

If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and God will deliver us out of your had, O King. *But if not*, be it known to you O King, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image you have set up!

*But if not!* Three of the bravest words in the Bible. They were saved in the fire, but they did not know they would be when they said those words and refused to bow their knee to the golden idol. Courage!

In the book of Esther, a beautiful young Jewish maiden was chosen above all women to be Queen of Persia. Later the king signed a decree to slaughter all the Jews in the kingdom, to “destroy, kill and annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children.” (Shades of the Holocaust). Esther’s uncle Mordechai heard of the decree and asked Esther to intervene on behalf of her people. At first she refused because of the danger of going uninvited into his chamber. Her uncle went to her again and said

Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the Jews.... Who knows? Perhaps you have come into your royal position for such a time as this!

She took courage, and she and her people were saved.

#### IV

The church, if it is doing its job, is a school of courage. Courage education is part of the curriculum! We tell stories such as these from the Bible—and of others through history who have been exemplars of courage. Like Sojourner Truth, the freed slave who worked for the abolition of slavery and women’s equality. And

Mississippi's Fannie Lou Hamer, hero of the Civil Rights movement. And John Lewis, bloodied, almost killed in Civil Rights protests who became a U.S. Representative for 33 years. And Nelson Mandela, held in a South African prison for 26 years and came out to become the President of South Africa. These words of his went around the world:

I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunity. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if need be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

In the school of courage we learn courage, and we also *act* courage as we go outside the church and stand for what is right. And when we do, courage begins to spread. Courage is contagious!

## V

There is one more form of courage I wish to talk about. It is a most personal form of bravery. We could call it spiritual courage. Paul Tillich called it "the courage to be".<sup>1</sup> It is the courage to go on living in the face of what he named as the three great threats to our personhood. The first is anxiety in the face of pain

and death. The second is anxiety in the face of emptiness and meaninglessness. The third is anxiety in the face of guilt and condemnation.

The threat of pain and death challenges our will to live. Our pain or death, or another's. Will I go on? For some, in great mental or physical pain, just to get out of bed and go to work is an act of courage, the courage to be.

The threat of meaninglessness strikes when life seems absurd, random, with no purpose and design and despair stalks our minds and hearts. What difference does anything make? Will I go on?

The threat of condemnation and guilt comes when we have broken our deepest codes of conduct, betrayed our deepest values. You may be carrying the guilt and condemnation in private; you might have borne them in public shame. You do not know how to go on. You may not want to go on. Will I go on?

There are days we may wonder how to go on. Then God breaks into our darkness and gives us the *courage to be*. God says, Do not be ashamed. Be not afraid. You are accepted! Lift up your hearts. Rise and walk.

In Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, where God seems nowhere to be found, one character, Vladimir, asks another, Pozo, "Where are you going?" Pozo answers, "On!" The courage to be.

When you stand up for someone being ridiculed it is courage, the courage to love. When the church loves people whom others reject and despise, it is displaying courage, the *courage to love*. When it acts on behalf of others in public, it is displaying the *courage to love*. Carlyle Marney said once, when a church is doing the right things, no one needs to ask for their address. They will know.

May it be said of us at Grace: Their mailing address is 719 Club Drive. But their real address, their spiritual address, is *at the corner of Love and Courage!*

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1. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), especially pages 40-63.