

“TO AN UNKNOWN GOD” - renamed “COURAGE”

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First Presbyterian Church, Bordentown NJ

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Scripture: Acts 17:22-31 • Psalm 66:8-20 • 1 Peter 3:13-22 • John 14:15-21

Well, this sermon did not go the direction I thought it would when I titled it. The title comes from the reading from Acts, and is an intriguing thought. But then I hit the meat of our reading from I Peter.

All of today’s readings seem to focus on how we evangelize . . . Paul, in Acts, speaks gently in the language and customs of the people. Peter insists that we must be Christlike, so that those who criticize us may be put to shame. In the Psalm, God’s deeds of mercy toward the Psalmist are stated plainly to the God-fearers: “Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me.” (v. 16) And John waxes on about how love defines Christ’s flock, and that we have access to the Holy Spirit that others do not. Now I’m not sure that latter part will preach to someone seeking religion or faith . . . “nyah, nyah, nyah . . . we’ve got the Holy Spirit and you don’t!”

But the love that John raises up, and the heart of the passage from I Peter speak to a different kind of **evangelizing** . . . a different kind of **ministry** . . . a different kind of **living**. And we can include Paul and the Psalmist in this too . . . this is a life of sacrificial giving, of care for the neighbor, of sharing God’s love for each and every one of God’s children.

So forget the sermon title, and listen to this commentator’s observation. Listen carefully, and I’ll repeat it, because it is the point of my sermon:

"Prosperity theology [such as that of many media preachers] becomes the religious justification for a lifestyle that defines riches produced by global structures of oppression as God's blessings upon one group."¹

The author arrives at this position, commenting on the theology of the passage from I Peter. I Peter is speaking to a group that is either under persecution, or will soon be persecuted. And I Peter exhorts them to bear up under persecution, imitating Christ and doing only good — not yielding under pressure to do what they know is wrong. So the author continues, saying,

“To understand a theology that stresses the identification of Christ with the faithful, we need to indicate who today continues to suffer and be persecuted by the empire. To obey and follow Christ who was persecuted on the cross is to share in his suffering. This is a message radically different from what is usually preached about the consequences of being a follower of Christ. For many, to be a Christian is not a life of suffering, but one of worldly rewards . . . [which] contradicts what the author of I Peter sets out to be the norm for Christians — that suffering and persecution are inevitable for the one who believes.”²

“Suffering and persecution are inevitable for the one who believes.” Wow - try that the next time you invite a neighbor to come to church with you!

So perhaps we might want to rename this sermon, “COURAGE”. In fact, I’ve wanted to preach about courage for a long time, in order to tell yet another story that has been told about me in others’ sermons. You see, this story defines courage by its absence.

I was about 8 months pregnant, and attending an Ice Capades event with my 3-year old daughter. We were in downtown Buffalo, at the old War Memorial Stadium. We had had a great time, and were walking out, not focusing much on our surroundings. I steered us toward a nearly empty side entrance, because it was closer to our car, and as we went out, a young man said “Hold the door, Lady!” Well, I apparently thought that requiring all who entered to have to purchase tickets was in my hands, and I said “No!” and shut the door behind me. I did this without thinking – it was just a reaction to someone breaking the rules — one of those “parent messages.”

Well, now I stood outside the stadium, clutching my daughter’s hand tightly, in the presence of about 5 young men who were (fortunately) startled at my response. And as we walked quickly to the car, I admonished her to say nothing and just keep walking.

I had made myself vulnerable — AND I had put my 3 year-old in danger as well. We did get to the car safely, and I’m sure someone else let those boys in, although that entrance wasn’t very well used.

Now, courage would be if I had surveyed the situation and had knowingly put myself in a situation of danger to myself. I’m not sure there’s any courage in putting my daughter in that situation, much less my unborn child. So this story has often been told to illustrate the difference between courage and stupidity.

This week, I read another succinct and colorful description of courage:

A colleague of mine wrote this brief note on Facebook: Quoting my “oldest [son], processing [his experience on] the roller coaster [that] I [had] strongly encouraged him to ride: "oh yeah? Well courage tastes like BARF." And she responded correctly, “yes, son. It does.”³ True courage includes an element of fear.

Now the audiences of I Peter and the Gospel According to John were both comprised of folk who indeed felt fear. Fear of government persecution, fear of the brute power of empire, fear of being obvious in differing from the norm. And so these passages were intended to give them strength and comfort, to enable them to act courageously in the face of known danger. And just a little later in John, shortly after today’s reading, we find “no one has greater love than this: that someone would lay down his life on behalf of his friends.” (v. 15)

Many stories of courage have emerged from the recent spate of violent weather. One of the most poignant came from a woman who survived the destruction of her home in Joplin.

“As a tornado tore his Joplin, Mo., home apart, Don Lansaw did what came naturally: He threw himself on top of his wife Bethany to protect her. And in doing so, he gave his life for her.

”The house was ripping apart, it all happened so fast,’ Bethany Lansaw told NBC News. ‘All the pillows were flying off of us, the only thing I managed to do was keep one in front of my face.’

“Once the wind died down, Bethany recounted, she looked over to see that her husband was turning blue. He died before she could find an ambulance to get him to the hospital.

”Don, 31, was a former high-school football star, and owned a machine shop. Bethany, 25, worked at a local university. The couple had been married six years and planned to start a family.

”You know, people kept saying he wouldn't have wanted it any other way, but if I could have taken twice as much damage just to have him alive, I would have,’ Bethany said.

”He did what he could to protect his family,’ she added. ‘He’s my hero.’”⁴

The courage of a spouse, a parent, a friend; the willing sacrifice – either actual or wished for. So too, the sacrifice of a buddy in a bunker. These are stories of true heroes.

And one last story - an example of how acts of courage can lead to reconciliation:

This happened during apartheid in South Africa, “when laws prevented black South Africans from mixing with whites. At the death of a white South African official who had worked within the system to humanize life for the oppressed, the blacks were turned away from his funeral, despite the wishes of the family. It was a terrible insult. Isaiah Buti, a black pastor, visited the white chief justice, whom he had reason to imagine as a friend to his oppressed people. He asked the judge to participate in the Good Friday service where the [black] congregation would observe Jesus’ practice of washing the disciples’ feet. He asked the chief justice to wash the feet of a congregant who had been a servant in the judge’s home and had cared for his children. The chief justice readily agreed, though he asked to participate in the service without any prior announcement.

“When the time came for the judge to wash Martha Foruin’s feet, the judge came forward and washed and dried her feet. Before he rose to return to his seat, he took her feet and gently kissed them both. It was a gesture that set healing in motion, because in that simple extra expression of care, he disclosed the truthfulness and the life-giving power of God’s love. Of course the act became known and the judge’s career was affected, but he had no regrets, because he too experienced the life-giving power of love that helps us recognize each other as neighbors.”⁵

So let us take from the encouragement of scripture, and from the examples we find in every-day living, the ability to be courageous in the face, not only of difficulty, but also in the face of evil and death. Going back to my earlier quote,

"Prosperity theology [such as that of many media preachers] becomes the religious justification for a lifestyle that defines riches produced by global structures of oppression as God's blessings upon one group."

We know that we Americans use more than our share, per capita, of the earth’s natural resources. We know that our actions affect folk decimated by coal mining in South America, whose water is poisoned and lives shortened. We know that not making choices to help stem climate change continues the destruction of ecosystems and interrupts food chains and migrating patterns. We know that fighting over oil, fighting over religion, fighting over turf, that all these things continue violence and pain in places we will probably never see.

It will take courage to stand up to the monied and powerful who often control the making of war and resist the making of peace. And we gain our courage, knowing in Paul’s words in Acts, “In him we live and move and have our being”. Christ is that close to us. The Spirit, he said, is in us. "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." (John 14:18-21)

Let us pray.

You, O God, are Lord of all people:
 those who call upon your name
 and those who do not know you.
Yet, we know you have created us of common clay,
 and that your greatest desire
 is that all your children turn to you
 in adoration and praise.
Help us, through patient listening
 and faithful speaking
 to enter into those precious encounters
 where heart meets heart:
 that you, too, may be there in the meeting.
In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.⁶

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ENDNOTES

1. Miguel A. De La Torre [Iliff Seminary, DenverCO], *Feasting on the Word*, A2, p. 486.
2. *Ibid.*
3. The Rev. Katie Mulligan on Facebook, May 28, 2011.
4. *Yahoo News*, Friday, May 27, 11:39 am ET, “Husband gave life to save wife from tornado — ‘He was my hero’”, by Zachary Roth.
5. Nancy Ramsay [Brite Divinity School, TCU, Texas], quoting Alan Paton in *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful*, in *Feasting on the Word*, A2, p. 494.
6. Carlos Wilton, *Lectionary Preaching Workbook*, Series VIII, Cycle A, 194.