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***“The Greater Courage”***

*John 18:1-11*

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**18** After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. **2** Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. **3** So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. **4** Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” **5** They answered, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus replied, “I am he.”- Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. **6** When Jesus said to them, “I am he,” they stepped back and fell to the ground. **7** Again he asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” **8** Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.” **9** This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, “I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me.” **10** Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest’s slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave’s name was Malchus. **11** Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?”

“Courage” was a popular topic in the years following the Second World War. The war was horrific and the sacrifices necessary to defeat Germany and Japan were incredible. Endless were the stories of valor. Audie Murphy was decorated more than any other soldier. Once he single-handedly held off a German company for an hour until reinforcements could arrive, and then he led the counterattack.

A member of this congregation was a celebrated hero. Bill Overstreet was a fighter pilot who, among other exploits, flew his P-51 Mustang under the Eiffel Tower in pursuit of a German Messerschmitt that he eventually shot down.

These stories of valor in battle helped Americans understand the enormity of the sacrifices needed to defeat Germany and Japan. Children – mostly boys – were inspired by these stories and dreamed of the day when they could be as heroic. I certainly was one of them, with all my toy soldiers with which I played constantly in creating battle scenes in the living room using the legs of chairs and the coffee table as perfect cover for my snipers. For us boys, the word, “courage,” was almost always defined by putting one’s health and life at risk in a fight for a good cause.

In our passage, Peter showed this kind of courage. It’s pretty impressive, though foolish, the risk that Peter takes. Betrayed by Judas, an armed mob is sent by the High Priest to seize Jesus. And what does Peter do? In the face of overwhelming odds, he puts his life on the line to defend his master. He draws his sword and attacks the slave of the High Priest.

We don't know if Peter is to be left on his own or joined by other disciples in some kind of night brawl in the garden because Jesus intervenes. He commands Peter to put his sword back in its sheath.<sup>1</sup>

If courage is fighting, and amazing courage is fighting against overwhelming odds, then Peter is the Audie Murphy of our passage. Willing to lose his life in defense of Jesus, he takes on an entire company. That's nerve.

But if we read further in this chapter from John's Gospel, we would learn that while Peter has the nerve to go to war, he does not have the nerve to go to the cross.

After Jesus is arrested, he is taken before various authorities, both Jewish and Roman, and put on trial. Peter follows along. He is devastated and afraid for Jesus and, with time to think about it, *afraid for himself*. He enters the courtyard outside the room where Jesus is tried before the High Priest. He hears Jesus accused and physically attacked. Though Peter is disguised, there is something about his look and something about his accent that makes others around him wonder if he is not one of the Jesus followers. Three times Peter is asked if he is, and the courage that was there when he only had a moment to react is now gone. Three times he denies knowing Jesus.

But understand something: Jesus was never looking for that kind of courage from Peter; not now in the courtyard and not earlier in the garden. Jesus is looking for a greater kind of courage in Peter . . . and in you and in me. Going back to our passage, we are not to be inspired by Peter wielding his sword in defense of Jesus, or Jesus surrendering himself to save the lives of both the mob and his disciples?<sup>2</sup>

Jesus' courage is greater for two reasons. First, his courage is greater because it is to be shown in a life and not just in a moment. Perhaps even for Jesus, more challenging than the moment of the cross was a life bearing the cross. Second, his courage is greater because it is a courage the world often calls "weak."

Since this is not Good Friday and we're speaking of a life more than a moment, let's consider Jesus' life. I'd like to reflect on two instances that I think exemplify his whole ministry.

I will start with a scene at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus preaches his first sermon in his hometown synagogue. The temptation for Jesus here would be to please the home crowd to make them proud. He begins well enough and all speak well of him. But then Jesus reads and comments on a passage they do not want to hear. His hometown crowd is a Jews-Only bunch who are resentful because they think they live in a Gentile-first world. Jesus' word for them is that God's mercy is for all people, not just the Jews. Worship is sometimes described as *Call and Response*. Well, in this worship service, Jesus calls for compassion and they respond with violence by trying to throw Jesus over a cliff. Where is the greater courage here; the violent mob showing Jesus their muscle or the one who tells the truth that the mob doesn't want to hear?

Have you glimpsed this kind of courage before:

- the one who loves a friend enough to speak the truth even when it is a truth the friend doesn't want to hear,

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<sup>1</sup> Notice the irony that the one who was wounded was a slave who was forced to be there. The victims of war are often those who, with little to no choice, have been put in harm's way. Think of innocent civilians or soldiers constricted or trying to escape poverty.

<sup>2</sup> In Luke's Gospel, Jesus first tends to the wound of the slave (Luke 22:52).

- the one who calls for kindness even when one's family, one's people, one's crowd is chanting for hardness?

I was given a glimpse of this kind of courage this past Friday. A week from tomorrow we will have a memorial service for Marj Murray, a longtime faithful member of this congregation. Her children shared with Elizabeth, Rachel, and me a Valedictorian address Marge gave at her High School graduation. The graduation took place on a day between V.E. Day and V.J. Day and she began her address by saying "the war in Europe has come to an end. It is inevitable that the war with Japan will also end and we shall try again to make the peace."

Here is 18-year-old Marj standing before her home crowd including her family. Her children wanted us to know that this was a day when women were expected to be soft and demure, and to avoid certain topics. How easy it would have been for Marj simply to have praised the amazing courage of those who fought and won the war with Germany, and then call for equal courage and strength in protecting liberty. I am sure all would have spoken well of her.

But here is what Marj had to say. She praised the war effort, certainly, but that was not her point. She said that if many Germans were asked that day if they were Nazi in their hearts, most would say they were not. "Industrialists and merchants, craftsmen and little shopkeepers," would say they had to go along with the Nazis or they would lose business and risk arrest and execution. She said the little people, the laborers and farmers, would say they had to do what they were told. But look, Marj said, at the results of everyone going along; tens of millions of Germans wandering the streets in need of shelter and food.

Marj then got to her point. She said:

"The story of the rise of Nazism is the story of a people who lost their moral sense while seeking security. It is the story of Germany and also the story of any country wherever men think more of profits and comfort than they do of the souls God gave them to separate them from the animals; the souls God gave them to make them free."<sup>3</sup>

She ended up expressing her hope that America would not "sell its soul for prosperity and security."

Hers may not have been the celebratory speech many would have preferred Marj to give, but her love for this country and her greater love for God shines all the way through. As a good Presbyterian raised in the theology of John Calvin, she saw the line of original sin running through every human heart.

I'll turn now to one other moment in Jesus' life. Despite his sermon at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus still reflects his upbringing. While he is not Jews-Only, he is at this point in his ministry Jews-First. He believes that the kingdom of justice and compassion must be made known first in Israel, and then later in the rest of the world. And this Jesus-

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<sup>3</sup> Marj added, "What is to prevent a man backed by industrialists and businessmen as Hitler was from starting such a movement here?" . . . We have our little Hitlers (Marj called out names: Huey Long and Boss Hogue, the Pendergasts and Kellys). . . . They rose because some of the industrial leaders of America were perfectly willing to incite [hates so they] multiply and grow until they become dangerous to the very life of the nation.

The quote in brackets corrects a place in Marj's speech where something was missing from the text.

a man in a man's world,  
a Jew in Jewish company,  
a Rabbi celebrated for his understanding of God's Law,  
and someone who is so popular crowds follow him wherever he goes –  
is challenged by someone who would be so easy for him to ignore.

A woman,  
a Gentile woman,  
an outsider,  
and a nobody.

She wants Jesus to help her daughter.

Jesus doesn't have to listen to her. He has nothing to gain with the crowd by helping her, and certainly doesn't need the woman's endorsement or support. Still, after initially trying to brush her off, Jesus listens to her plea that God's grace is not just there for Jews but also for people like her, and even more for her daughter . . . and God's grace is needed right now and not later after Jesus' people, the Jews, are taken care of. Jesus listens and then changes the entire direction of his ministry. From this point on Jesus takes his ministry into Gentile as well as Jewish territory. That Jesus' mind can be changed reflects his humanity. That he changes his mind honors his divinity.

Can you see the greater courage in Jesus' empathy and his willingness to listen and respond to those who are easily dismissed even when it doesn't suit the crowd or his own agenda? Again, Jesus shows the strength that those who think in terms of winning and losing see as weakness: the strength of vulnerability and the strength of empathy.

Can you see this courage reflected in those who give of themselves and resources to be in solidarity with and support of those who are out of sight and out of mind of many of their neighbors?

Or can you see this courage reflected in those who are willing to lose ground in order to gain peace? I meet all the time with couples considering marriage. In premarital conversation, I often say that the art of a lasting and healthy marriage is the art of reconciliation, appearing weak in order to be strong. It is natural to want to be right and to win. But when it comes to disagreements within marriage, the logic of winning can be the logic that weakens the bond. One can lose by winning. Respect and trust are what keep a marriage strong and both have to be built and protected. It means listening in order to understand, not listening to find things to use against the other. It is the willingness to compromise, to admit faults, to ask for forgiveness and accept it, and to love the other even though you are not always on the same page.

That is what I say about marriage, but I think Jesus would say that about life.

I admire the courage it takes to put one's life on the line in a moment. I have listened to the stories of many people who have served in the military, and I have spoken to a few heroes such as one guy who pulled fellow passengers out of a crashed plane . . . twice! I am in awe of their bravery.

But I think I know something of where Jesus is coming from because the Gospel preached and taught by my parents and my childhood churches got into me.

- I am impressed by those who have the courage to admit wrongs when they are not forced to do it; who are willing to change their minds even if it means their losing something they cherish or losing the support of friends.
- I am impressed by the courage of those who go to recovery meetings week after week where they tell and hear stories that keep reminding them of their need for God and each other.
- I am impressed by the courage of those who remain in relationships – family, friendships, community – even when those relationships become hard because love keeps them there even when it is not fun.
- I am impressed by the courage of those who stay committed to the greater good of the community even when the community includes those who sometimes treat you like an enemy.
- And I am impressed by those who work for peace. They are heroes especially because they are not always celebrated as such.

Shane Claiborne says,

“The only thing harder than war is peace. The only thing that takes more work, tears, and sweat than division is reconciliation. But what more beautiful things could we devote our lives to? Until the courage that we have for peace surpasses the courage that we have for war, violence will continue to triumph.”<sup>4</sup>

I am impressed by the courage of Jesus’ kind of love, seen in the moment of the cross, and seen in the living of his life. I am frequently a coward when it comes to that kind of love, so I’ll join any of you who pray for the Holy Spirit’s encouragement.

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<sup>4</sup> Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, Zondervan, 2006, page 285.