

## *Searching for Courage*

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My sister is incredibly brave, and I really admire that about her. She is always going to say what is on her mind, she is going to take the path that no one else will if that is what she wants, she will do what makes her happy even when it's unpopular, she will confront people who have hurt her. And as someone who is sometimes on the receiving end of that bravery it can be rough but MAN do I admire it.

I, on the other hand, do not see myself as a courageous person. In the slightest. I do not like to rock the boat. Truthfully, if there is conflict I would usually rather avoid it at all costs. I find myself operating from a place of fear more often than a place of courage or bravery. I'm afraid I'm going to say the wrong thing and really hurt someone, I'm afraid I'm going to forget a commitment and let someone down. When I really sit down and reflect, I am afraid of so much all of the time.

When I look at stories like the one we read today from Acts, I cannot imagine myself in that place. I mean think about it. Our verses from Acts pick up in the middle of a story. The previous day Peter had been healing the sick and preaching the resurrection of Jesus. This disturbed the religious leaders, so they arrested Peter and John until the next day. Our verses pick up the story where Peter goes before the religious authorities. These are the very same people that sentenced Jesus to his death; the names of each of the people listed in verse 6 appear in at least one of the gospels and are all directly coordinated with the plotting and execution of the plan to kill Jesus. Peter knows this. And yet, he stands before them and **BOLDLY** proclaims that the healing and teaching he was doing the day prior was done in the name of Jesus, the man these religious leaders killed.

I'm sorry what??? That is a bravery that I cannot fathom. When I imagine being in Peter's place, all I can picture is me shaking in my boots and probably crying.

So much of our history as Christians is rooted in this immense bravery. Until the conversion of Emperor Constantine and the incorporation of the Church into the Empire in 313 CE, the Early Church experienced great persecution. There are countless stories of people who were martyred for their faith both remembered and forgotten. For example, there is the story of Perpetua and Felicity, two women whose largely first-hand account of their martyrdom has been preserved to this day. In the story of their martyrdom the women are described with great courage and resilience, and this is true of so many of the church's earliest saints. They stood with great tenacity up against an

empire and religious institution that was so much larger than there fledgling religious movement and spoke truth to power.

But that bravery did not end with the early church. We have examples of later church martyrs who also spoke truth to power. For example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor and theologian in Nazi Germany. His writings focused on Christianity's role and responsibility in the world, and for him, this included opposition to the National Socialism of the Nazi party to the point that he was caught and executed for his participation in an attempt to overthrow the Nazi regime.

Even in our modern time there are examples of normal every day people with the extreme bravery to speak truth to power. Take for example, the story of Bree Newsome, a young black woman from South Carolina who scaled the thirty foot flagpole outside the state's capitol building and removed its Confederate flag ten days after a white supremacist killed nine people during a service Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston. As Bree Newsome tore down the flag she declared to the protestors who shouted at her from below "In the name of Jesus this flag has to come down. You come against me with hatred and oppression and violence. I come against you in the name of God. This flag comes down today."<sup>1</sup>

I admire these saints so incredibly much, but when I seriously take a step back and think about it, I don't know if I would ever actually have the courage to be like them, and as a white, middle-class woman, I recognize that my cowardice is a great privilege. Even so, I really struggle to see myself in the place of these saints.

Our society feeds us these depictions of courage that look a lot like GI Joe. Someone who is courageous is big and strong and tough and brave, and while that can certainly be an aspect of courage, these saints throughout our Christian history are empowered by something greater. To do the things that faithful Christians have done throughout history requires something more than big muscles and grit. They are empowered by a courage that is fed by something softer and more intimate but also just as if not more powerful. Their work is empowered by love.

Friends, true love is what empowers us to be courageous.

In his book, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit*, Henri Nouwen talks about our spiritual formation with God in terms of movements from something toward something else that brings us closer to God. One of his movements is the movement from fear to love. Nouwen talks about fear and love as houses. When we live in the house of fear, it impacts the way we see the

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<sup>1</sup> Bree Newsome quoted by Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2018), 115.

world, and “what we see from the perch of fear is alienation and scarcity.”<sup>2</sup> When we look at the world through a lens of fear it begets more fear. “It never gives birth to love.”<sup>3</sup>

This is not where we are meant to live my dear ones. God’s love that is incarnate in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ is meant to empower our movement from the house of fear into the house of love. Nouwen asserts that “when we being to understand at a deep, spiritual level that we live surrounded by love and in communion with God no matter what the external circumstances, we can let go of the fear that lurks on the outskirts of our minds.”<sup>4</sup> We are encouraged because our true identity is that we are beloved children of God and that is enough. “Every time [we] feel afraid, [we] can open [ourselves] to God’s presence, hear God’s voice again, and be brought back to perfect love that casts out fear and brings in greater freedom.”<sup>5</sup>

We cannot live in the house of fear. God calls us further. And this movement from fear to “love is necessary not just for each of us individually, but for the survival of the human family.”<sup>6</sup> We are made courageous so we may care for our community, speak out against the powers and principalities of this day, and seek the wellbeing of every single person through Christ’s all-powerful love that defeats death and darkness.

My New Testament Professor, Dr. Carla Works says that in a lot of church’s today we have lost the radical nature of the gospel of Jesus and that we have forgotten just how powerful the good news of Christ is. And I would agree with her, I would also add that in a lot of ways we have watered down the immense, awe-inspiring, undefinable love of God. In our attempts to understand God and God’s love we use metaphors that can only grasp a small semblance of that love and in many ways as a Church we have begun to understand God’s love as those metaphors, losing sight of just how big it really is. This love of God shown to us through the life of Christ that we are meant to experience and share in the world is not meant to be watered down. I mean it literally comes to the disciples in a fire at Pentecost. God’s love is so big that it cannot be contained to merely words or speech. When we live in the house of love, we are transformed in such a way that our lives cannot stay the same. The love of God will move in us that we are transformed in all that we do and are. That is where our reading from 1 John comes in.

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<sup>2</sup> Henri Nouwen, Michael J. Christensen, and Rebecca J Laird, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York, NY: HarperOne, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 75.

<sup>3</sup> Nouwen, 75.

<sup>4</sup> Nouwen, 79.

<sup>5</sup> Nouwen, 81.

<sup>6</sup>Nouwen, 81.

In verse 23, this letter from the Johannine school invokes the greatest commandment that Jesus gave his disciples with some new language. The author of this epistle interprets Jesus' commandment saying, "that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he commanded us."

Now, I grew up in Arkansas in the thick of the Bible Belt, and there are some people who would use this verse to condemn and judge people who are not Christians, using this text as basis for telling a person they are going to hell. So, Let me say to you right now that this interpretation of the text is harmful. It is a foul and disgusting misappropriation of the love that is found in this text we view as sacred, and it is shameful to use the Bible in any way that is condemning and not loving.

I also think this interpretation does a great disservice to the text. Because what does it even mean to believe in the name of his son Jesus Christ? Is simply confessing that we believe a guy named Jesus lived 2000 years ago and we believe he is the Messiah enough? I don't think so. In the ancient world faith and belief had little to do with thought and everything to do with action. It was not enough to simply say I believe I can sit in the chairs behind me because belief in the ancient world meant I believe I can sit in the chairs behind me so I will sit in it.

That is where the second half of this commandment comes in: "love one another." Our belief should lead to love and that love should manifest itself in action. We are called to actually live into our belief. Our commitment to and faith in God call us to love fiercely with greater power and resolve with greater courage no matter what society would have us do otherwise. In a world that is constantly telling us messages of fear, our faith calls us to live in abundant and courageous love.

This unbridled love found in the ministry of Jesus that we read about in 1 John is the path to salvation that Peter declares in Acts.

Now, salvation can be another one of those scary words. Growing up, I was taught that salvation was about heaven and hell, but that's not what I think this scripture is talking about. The Greek word that is translated as salvation is *sōtēria* and the definition of this word has no connection to hell or judgement. Instead, *sōtēria* refers to deliverance, preservation, and safety.

We all know that the world is not as it should be. All you have to do is turn on the news, look outside, or really just exist in this world to know that is true. All around there are people in pain who suffer at the hands of systems that do not value their belovedness. There are people who though they are surrounded by other people feel horribly alone and unseen. Our society is hyper focused on individualism. We are concerned with ourselves, how we will get ahead, how a certain person,

place, or thing will benefit or serve us, but our individualism will not save us. Our deliverance cannot come when we only think of ourselves.

Our survival and salvation require us to depend on one another with the love in our hearts that has been shown to us through Christ. Our faith and trust in the strength of the courageous love within our community is the key to our communal salvation. There is an African term, ubuntu, that means I am because you are. We all exist in an interconnected web, and we need one another. I cannot live an abundant life if my neighbor is not also living one. But in order for us all to live in that abundance requires immense courage and faith. We have to be willing to sit in the chair before we know for a fact that the chair will support us.

So what does that look like for you in your life, what does that look like for us as a Church? To be completely honest I don't entirely know. That is a prayer that I have prayed a lot for God to illuminate what it might look like for the world to be as God desires and what I may do to help build that world. What I do know is the examples we are given in the Bible and they are radical. 1 John tells us that we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters. We are to lay down our comforts, lay down our false idols of convenience, so we all may live. We are to look at our siblings in Christ and see their beloved humanity and work for the creation of a society that will also see, respect, and defend it.

This is a big task my friends. It is hard and scary and incredibly uncomfortable, but it is to this work that we as the body of Christ are called, so with the love of Christ may we be encouraged. Amen.