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St. Thomas Church
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Acts 1:6-14; 1 Peter 4:12-14,
5:6-11; John 17:1-11

A Courageous Faith

My grandfather was one the bravest men I have ever known. When he returned from World War I, he had lost half of his hearing and lung capacity and suffered from post-traumatic stress for the remainder of his life. He was awarded the Purple Heart for his sacrifice, and I count it among my cherished possessions. He married my grandmother and left the family farm in Indiana as he was no longer strong enough to be a farmer and eventually taught himself how to be an electrical engineer without any formal schooling. He had two beautiful children, one of whom was my father.

Despite his disabilities and shaky nerves, he lived a long and productive life. In retirement, he unselfishly served his community of Sherwood, Oregon helping to rebuild the library, community park, and almost everything else. He was famous for mentoring wayward teens, especially males, in trouble with the law and helping them learn life lessons and skills.

I never once heard him complain about the war despite the high price he had paid, he was proud to have served his country, he was a Christian of enormous faith and courage. Through God's grace he resisted the temptation to become paralyzed by fear or become a violent man mired by hatred toward those who had caused wounds that endured a lifetime. This was no easy task.

In the aftermath of the recent terrorist bombing in Manchester and the senseless deaths of Coptic Christians on their way to visit a monastery, and in honor of Memorial Day when we pause to remember our veterans, I think it is only fitting that we explore the virtue of courage and the implications for our life in Christ. Cardinal Vincent Nichols, of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Westminster in London offered this prayer for all who died in Manchester, "May God welcome into His merciful presence all who have died. May God turn the hearts of all who commit evil to a true understanding of God's desire and intention for humanity."

God's deepest desires and intentions for humanity can be found in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles recounting the miraculous event of Jesus' ascension into heaven. Even though Easter has already happened, and the power of the

resurrection revealed through several stories of Jesus appearing in his new resurrected body, these original apostles remain anxious about their future in light of the great unrest in their world and have this question for Jesus: “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Like us, they too lived during a time of war and rumor of wars. They were just forty years away from their Temple being destroyed and life, as they knew it, radically altered. The Roman army took many of the Jews captive and forced them to build the colossal ego project in Rome known as the Colosseum.

So, you can imagine their frustration, even anger, with Jesus when he tells them that whatever happens Kingdom-wise will be on God’s time table and not theirs — no matter how urgent their need for safety and security might be. And the power that will be arriving will not be led by a general but a power from on high. Jesus promises them the arrival of the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a power that will allow them to do great things. But the significance of this message is lost, at least initially. All they can think to do is keep looking up to heaven as their beloved Jesus disappears in the mist of a cloud.

Think of the amazing courage it must have taken for those apostles to not give up at that moment and feel completely abandoned: “That’s just great, Jesus, you go ahead and ascend to heaven and sit at the right hand of the Father and leave us with all of the problems down here on earth.” Wasn’t witnessing and enduring the crucifixion enough? The disciples had already experienced the pain and confusion—even despair of being left without a leader in the face of great danger.

This morning’s reading from first Peter describes the fiery ordeal and testing that so many of us feel in this world in which we live where violence is let loose on a regular basis and we are left without enough courageous leadership. We, like those first Christians, are increasingly being challenged to find God’s voice and powerfully express it as we face our fears in the midst of roaring lions, devils, and adversaries—many of whom have found their way inside of our own souls. When our values of “faith, hope, and love” are threatened (which they clearly are during these challenging times) it is very difficult to not “go to and stay in” a dark place and move away from living a life of true and godly courage. As Mother Karen reminded us in one of her sermons, “We cannot just do nothing.”

The word courage is so rich with meaning. Ultimately, courage describes the condition of our hearts. It means to be brave enough to speak one’s mind by telling all of what’s on one’s heart and then acting on it under the direction of God’s

spirit. We have come to think courage applies mainly to heroic deeds and extraordinary bravery on the battlefield (it certainly can be found there!) but “everyday courage” is found every time we speak our truth from the heart and from our most real and authentic selves. And this always has something to do with establishing peace and justice in our world. Just this morning three very brave men stood up to protect Muslim women from being victims of hate crimes on a Portland train. Two have lost their lives. One remains in critical condition.

Jesus shows us that when we courageously speak and act from our true selves created in the image of God and when others we engage are listening from their true selves then authentic transformation can occur. This is God’s ultimate intention for humanity. Jesus spoke with courage and from his true self when promised his original followers and us that he would return in the form of the Holy Spirit. He would not leave us abandoned, orphaned, or wounded on the battlefields of our lives. He promised to lead us to His glory.

One of the most beautiful lines in scripture is this, “the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.” This is a truth we celebrate every Sunday when we pray, “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord. God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of your Glory. Hosanna in the Highest.

There are so many ways to think about God’s glory. Eastern Orthodox Christians have a wonderful way of talking about the process by which God’s fullest glory is revealed in humanity. In all of God’s creation the power of redemption is at work. Nothing reveals God’s glory, majesty, power, and grace more than God’s process of healing the divisions of the world and bringing us in closer union with God and each other.

This is Jesus’ ultimate prayer which is captured in today’s gospel lesson. “And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” Jesus’ ascension is the final stage in the full redemption and glorification of what is best, deepest, and truest in our human nature. I don’t know about you but a lot of artwork that depicts the ascension of Christ has his feet dangling out of a cloud on his way to heaven. The image for Christ’s glory that I resonate more with is seeing a multitude of bright stars in a dark sky where there is no ambient light to dull their brilliance.

Jesus ascended to heaven so we might eventually discover that he continues to be seen and glorified in the lives of courageous saints who persevere with faith, hope, and love. And the virtue that makes all this possible is courage.

Courage to face all our fears yet still choose to act in love.

Courage to follow our heart even if it comes at a cost.

Courage to persevere in the face of adversity even if we become wounded in battle.

Courage to pray for our enemies.

Courage to allow God to be glorified through us as we become through grace what God is and does naturally and automatically.

I invite all of us to take time today to remember all the courageous saints in our lives and give thanks for those who have helped us see God's glory manifested in the world. May God help all of us find a truly courageous faith and receive a Purple Heart if that is where we need to start but, more importantly, find the courage to wear the holy and glorious heart of Jesus for the entire world to see. Amen.