

Resurrecting Courage

Dr. June Goudey, United Church of Christ in Simi Valley
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Acts 4 1-10, 13-20

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.

The next day the rulers, elders and teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and the other men of the high priest's family. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?" Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. "What are we going to do with these men?" they asked. "Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name."

Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

I Came To Learn

I came to learn about Love and I learned that we are Love in action.

I came to learn about Courage and I discovered that we are Courage in action.

I came to learn about Truth and I now realize that we are Truth in action.

I came to learn about Compassion and I now understand that we are Compassion in action.

I came to learn about Life and I now know that we are Life in action.

I came to learn about God and I am convinced that we are God in action.

Christopher Pacini

There are two ways to hear this morning's sermon: one is by focusing on the power of courage to occasion resurrection—new beginnings, new life, new hope; the other is to focus on our need at times to

resurrect courage, that is the need to dig down into the depths of our being and forge a way forward when obstacle after obstacle threatens to undo us. **Either way, courage lies at the core of our humanity**

Resurrecting courage has to do with tapping internal resources that seem dormant. Courage that resurrects has to do with looking within and *living an undivided life*. But here I'm getting ahead of myself. First we have to revisit the nature of courage itself.

Usually we associate courage in the extreme with bravery in war or an act of daring that defies all odds. Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* highlights courage in this way. Likewise contemporary movies like the recently released *Flight 93* tip the balance of courage towards daring. Without these visions of courage, our humanity would be compromised and our freedoms diminished. Yet there is more to courage than the spilling of blood.

As our national church has developed its ministry of extravagant welcome, John Thomas, President and General Minister of the UCC, has spoken with equal conviction about evangelical courage... In Thomas' words, **evangelical courage** is "... the going against the grain of the cultural trajectory of the present moment..."

Our still speaking campaign is an excellent example of what it means to go against the cultural grain of the present moment; but we dare not forget that today's campaign rests on years of evangelical courage acted out in the areas of Civil Rights, environmentalism, education, and most certainly our church's long standing commitment to the well-being of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered men and women.

Since Easter, I've been speaking about the practice of resurrection and the keeping of Easter. Each time I have tried to make it clear that **resurrection like courage is part of the natural tapestry of human life**. Practicing resurrection makes us aware of God's constant presence as well as God's ability to make justice out of our everyday acts of faithfulness. The ability to practice resurrection also relies on daily reflection on the place of God in our lives and daily acts of courage.

Most of us wait until there is a crisis in our lives to reflect on divine power and the nature of God or until a natural disaster forces us to deal with an upside down world. Last week I read reports in the Boston Globe on the recent floods in Massachusetts. This was the worst flooding in 70 years to hit the Merrimack Valley Northwest of Boston. Some homes are not expected to be habitable for weeks or even months, and it is not yet clear when all the 3,500 to 4,500 residents who left their homes in 17 communities will return. In the midst of this, one woman was quoted as saying. "I keep looking at this and thinking there is a good reason the Big Guy did this, but I haven't figured it out yet"

Thinking of God as "the big guy," a superpower figure who would do such things...is hardly conducive to resurrecting courage. When we need to dig deep and find a way to go forward with hope "Big Guy" theology will always let us down.

Thinking of God as all powerful perpetuates a sense of human powerlessness. Such thinking further creates the insidious and harmful image of a capricious God...one who acts impulsively and erratically... **the hulk gone wild**, if you will. Whether we live consciously or unconsciously with an image of an impulsive and erratic divine super power, one who knows our every move and plots our fate, our

capacity for courage erodes exponentially. Whether we associate Thomas' evangelical courage with Rabbi Abraham Heschel's notion of "[spiritual audacity](#)," or theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's "[touch of daring](#)" faith requires courage.

Without courage faith is history repeating itself ad infinitum. Without courage convictions are useless. Without courage communion is lifeless. Without courage life is as predictable as it is questionable. Why do something again and again if you have no clue to its meaning? And what does something really mean if you have no clue to its purpose in your life.

When courage is missing from our lives so too is [heart-work](#). The notion of heart-work I learned from the poet Rilke:

**Work of sight is done,
now do heart-work
on the pictures within you, those captives; for you
overcame them: but now do not know them.**

Courage and heart-work go hand in hand; to take heart is to take the measure of our humanness.

My friend and theological mentor Roger Hazelton learned the nature of courage first hand. As a seminarian in the late 1970's I visited him in his campus office on a day that the greatest despair of his life was playing havoc with his heart. In a moment of great humanness Roger knelt before me grasped my hands and wept as he shared the story of looking for his troubled son on a foggy New York bridge only to learn that he had arrived too late to save his son from jumping to his death off that very same bridge. Roger's pain was clearly unbearable, and yet somehow he found within himself the radical courage he needed to forge new life out of personal tragedy.

In the words of Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, two women who had the courage in 1989 to challenge the theological supremacy of John 3:16's "for God so loved the world," radical courage is at the heart of resurrection. Whenever we refuse the threat of death and choose life, radical courage provides the power we need to sustain that choice against all competing forces. [Courage forges meaning](#). Whenever we engage in heart-work, whenever we look long and hard at the motivations of our innermost being and the inner pictures that shape our decision making powers, we forge new meaning for our lives.

Whenever we take a sustained look at our theology and discover what image of God motivates our actions heart-work resurrects the courage we need to live undivided lives. If we are burdened by the "Big guy image of God", the punishing parent image of God, or a capricious and unpredictable view of God, yet find ourselves empowered to move beyond these outdated Sunday school images, we forge new possibilities for engaging God in all God's mysterious fullness.

We tend to think of courage as an immediate act of selflessness that arises in the spur of the moment...but radical courage, the courage to make clarifying life- choices that re-define the meaning of our lives takes time and preparation. It also takes a community of like searchers to provide sustenance and vision as our courage evolves.

Parker Palmer who wrote the *Courage to Teach*, published in 1998, captured this evolutionary process for me by studying various social movements, including “the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, and the movements for freedom in eastern Europe, South Africa and Latin America.” Embedded in these movements Palmer discerned 4 stages of growth that create a climate for transformation. Transformation that allows the movement to effect historic change in longstanding social patterns whose relevance is questionable at the very least and harmful in the extreme. The most critical stage for courage is stage one.

The first stage of a new social movement begins with what Palmer describes as a decision “to live [divided no more](#)”- isolated individuals in his view make an inward decision, silent and barely visible to the outside world, to address situations of suffering in their lives and choose well-being and good living. Becoming aware of the forces that are killing us softly is no easy task, but the rewards are well worth the struggle.

According to Palmer, when enough people decide to live an undivided life, over a long period of time their collective decisions have the power to bring about social and political transformation. Palmer calls this decision [the Rosa Parks decision](#); because he sees her as “[our most vivid icon of the undivided life.](#)” He also sees the movement for civil rights as a movement which still has much work to do. If we were to borrow the poetic words of Robert Frost, we could say it has miles to go before it sleeps.

Parks assumes an iconic status for Palmer because she [grew into her courage](#) by overcoming her doubts over a considerable period of time. Though trained in the strategies of non-violence, Parks later shared with Eleanor Roosevelt that she had once made it clear to her teachers that she wasn’t going to do anything because black people hadn’t been willing to stick together and address white racism. Ironically, Parks decision to sit in the whites’ only section, the front section of a segregated bus in Montgomery Alabama on December 1, 1955, became the very glue she saw missing in the civil rights movement.

Years later Parks gave the definitive answer to her actions. She said, “People always say that I didn’t give up my seat because I was tired, but that wasn’t true. I was not tired physically or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. [No the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.](#)”

Palmer goes on to say that the decision to live an undivided life goes well beyond criticizing an institution. It also embraces [a decision to be self-critical](#). Each of us, who decides to live an undivided life, is reclaiming our humanity. We do our best heart-work when we live a life of self-examination that encourages us to reclaim our power to be.

Radical courage enlists all of our powers, bodily and spiritual, in reclaiming authenticity and living with integrity. When that day happens we decide not be against something we hate, but [to work on behalf of that which allows our full humanity to flourish](#). Radical courage puts the lie to our own silent complicity with forces that seek to imprison us and distort our truths. Such complicity thrives whenever we allow others to rule our lives and compromise the very essence of who we are.

Parks’ decision to live an undivided life required nothing less than a great awakening. When she resurrected the “courage to be” she did so based on her personal awareness that by being silent she was

being complicit in her own demise. In resurrecting her courage, Parks birthed new life for herself and her people.

When we have the courage to look within ourselves, uncover our own truths and accept them for what they are...we unleash new life not only for ourselves but for those as yet unable to take that risk by themselves

Listen again to Pacini's poem

I came to learn about Love and I learned
that we are Love in action.

I came to learn about Courage and I
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I came to learn about Truth and I now
realize that we are Truth in action.

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I came to learn about God and I am
convinced that we are God in action.

To be God in action today is to stay true to ourselves and true to the graceful courage that undergirds our humanity.

In the words of Roger Hazelton, "discovering God's presence in the midst of life and not in some imaginary Beyond" is the key to graceful courage. "The perfecting of our nature, evidenced in courage, includes us and engages us in what [Teilhard de] Chardin called the *divine milieu*, where we live and breathe and are most at home. Only because the sense of divine presence, inescapable and elusive at once, empowers our most valorous or venturesome efforts can we truly be ourselves. Grace means participating in the 'power of being in everything that has being,'" as Paul Tillich wisely taught.

Resurrecting the courage to be human, by facing our frailties and weaving them into a more than human humanness a divine humanness if you will, requires us to endure. When we endure we choose to stand fast and hold our ground with God's help, as we bring forth the full measure of our humanity.

The challenge is a worthy one, and one worthy of us all. Until we are convinced that we are God in action, that our humanity holds the key to our divinity, our oneness with God, the courage of our convictions will keep us isolated and alone. To choose such a fate is unworthy of the God who calls us to be fully human and fully divine. Just because some Christians find this frightening there is no good reason not to resurrect the courage of Jesus that lives on in every disciple who takes his truth to heart. When the rulers and elder in the crowd that day realized that Peter and John were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished at their courage; and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. May those who need courage today say the same of us. We stand with Jesus and we stand with courage for the sake of resurrection, our own and the worlds. Amen.