

“Jesus is calling us to be a little bit braver than we imagine we can be.”

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, February 5, 2017, 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 58: 6-11

Matthew 5: 13-16

(by The Rev. Catherine Somerville)

I don’t consider myself to be very brave. Sometimes we try on words as we seek to define ourselves, much like we might try on a new sweater. Some descriptions fit who we understand ourselves to be. Some words don’t fit so well.

Being brave is one of those words for me. I don’t feel brave, and yet there have been times when I have done brave things.

I have heard it said that courage and bravery come to us in little bursts, twenty seconds at a time. For twenty seconds, we can do the brave thing. The rest of the time, we simply carry on.

In my work of offering pastoral care and visitation to people in our church, often at a time of crisis, I try out words on them, to see if it is a label they might accept, which might help them in even a small way, to better understand and deal with the situation they find themselves in.

Like patience: “You have learned how to wait, haven’t you? You have so much to teach me about patience.”

Or joy: “You have a deep joy that changes things. Joy helps you view the world in such a kind way.”

Since I have been thinking about bravery lately, I have been trying out that label on people... on some of you, actually. Like me, most folks don’t feel that it fits very well. And yet, I have heard some incredible stories of bravery.

A woman in our church immigrated to Canada after the war. She decided to go out and get a job, even though she didn’t speak a word of English. She was brave because she chose to thrive rather than simply survive.

Another person told me about physically making herself stand straighter as she faced the worst moment of parting in her life. She said that when you stand straight, it makes you stronger. She is brave because she made a choice to go forward.

Someone else told me how he copes. When he feels overwhelmed by life and the future, he writes things down. One time, he took out a piece of paper and wrote the word “fear.” Then he wrote down everything that made him feel afraid. He said that exercise helped him, for when he saw the list of things he was afraid of, they didn’t seem quite so scary any more. He was brave because he named his fears.

This week, people of faith have been shaken to the core, as we have heard the stories of the mosque shooting in Quebec City. People at prayer were killed simply because they chose to

come together to pray. They are just like us, for we come together as a community, knowing that one person's prayers are strong, but the prayers of a group make us stronger. I have always known that prayer is a powerful thing, but this week, I learned that praying together is an act of courage, a display of immense bravery.

You are brave to come here today.

Maybe that label doesn't sit well on you either, but what else can we do when the world's horror touches our living? We need to gather. We need to pray.

Prayer is an act of defiance against a world that says faith is expendable, and respect for other people is a waste of time. Prayer teaches us that we are not alone, that in the midst of the deepest, darkest night, when we feel humbled by life, faith's light will shine. Only when we have faced the limits of what we can do, does it begin to dawn on us the limitlessness of what God can do.

The only way to gain power in a world that is moving too fast is to learn to slow down. The only way to change how you want to be is to learn to go deep.

The world we want will only emerge from a spiritual stillness that takes root in our souls. Only then, will we be part of a world that reflects the heart instead of shattering it.

Every morning as we wake up, we can bless the world. We can pray that God will use us, maybe in the most ordinary of ways, to be a servant to something holy and true. We can take a deep breath and surrender ourselves to God's plan for our lives. You can begin each day by saying, "I am as God created me." We can be defiant by being kind, by offering compassion, by choosing to see best intentions rather than picking a side. We can be generous, loving, forgiving, gracious, and hopeful. We can choose to be brave.

That's what Jesus was talking about when he called the followers to be light, to be salt. We know from the time he began his ministry that he had a deep understanding about the words of the prophet, Isaiah. Isaiah offered a vision meant to turn the world on its ear. It was such a brave thing to say:

Share your bread, offer hospitality to the poor on the street, share your clothes — maybe you don't need a closet full of sweaters, and someone at the mission could use one or two. Speak good, kind words. Don't tell lies. Embrace a vision of our common humanity. Don't make the world into an "us vs. them" competition. For when you share your bread and your extra sweater, when you offer a listening ear and a bit of kindness, when you do those things, then light shall rise in the darkness.

Isaiah was telling the people that God cares much less about how we observe religious rules than how we live our ordinary lives. When we live out of compassion and act with bravery, then we truly encounter God.

Jesus called us to be salt and light. Both are valuable, not in and of themselves, but because they are catalysts for a fuller enjoyment and appreciation of life. We don't eat salt stew and we don't gaze directly into a light. We eat the stew made delicious by the addition of bit of

salt, and we gaze at the beauty of the world that is revealed to us through light that shines upon it.

Jesus is calling us to be a little bit braver than we imagine we can be. A counselor, John Jackson, often tells parents: "Please don't tell your children that it's easier to do right. That may not be true. Doing the right thing may require incredible courage and a willingness to face ridicule and rejection. But love enables us to try."

When we think about the state of the world, let's not forget how many people will do brave things today. Let's not forget how many people will fall in love today, and how many will smile at a stranger and mean it. Today, people will have babies, heal, create, act, forgive, become more enlightened, laugh, grow wiser, and love in spite of it all. In a world that seems to split in two between fear and love, our greatest power lies in sharpening our focus. Some things in the world today are very, very dark; what we need now is more people who are working for the light.

Let us pray: God, give us faith to live with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love is supporting us. Amen.

Sources used:

Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1, pages 315 to 319.

Seasons of the Spirit, February 4, 1996.

The Gift of Change: Spiritual Guidance for Living Your Best Life, Marianne Williamson, Harper Collins, 2004, page 86, page 22.