

## **The Teachings of Bravery and Humility**

A Sermon Shared with St. Andrew's United Church

on June 24, 2018 at 10:30 a.m. (Fifth Sunday after Pentecost)

Scripture Readings: Psalm 133; 2 Corinthians 6:1-11

(by The Rev. Catherine Somerville and The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

In months past we have referred to the traditional sacred teachings that are shared among many of our indigenous people. Those teachings, as shared in the Mohawk tradition, are Honesty, Respect, Truth, Wisdom, Bravery, Humility and Love. Today we will reflect upon two of those concepts as they relate to our own journey of faith as Christians, and as they are illuminated by our indigenous sisters and brothers: Bravery and Humility.

### **Bravery**

Many of my generation played a game of cowboys and Indians out in the back yards of our neighbourhood. There is good reason to be embarrassed, maybe even ashamed, that we entered into such culturally damaging and inappropriate activity decades ago. I cannot find a reason to redeem the practice, yet I do remember one thing about those exchanges that is very clear in my recollected experience of the activity – those who played the indigenous people, the “Indians,” were always the brave ones. They acted with dignity and self-respect; they were not easily swayed to do what they did not want to do, and they carried themselves with an air of confidence.

For that reason, I never played the Indian because I was willing to hide behind fortresses or be part of a larger group. Individual strength marked the ways in which we understood indigenous braves of that time.

Well, not to diminish the bravery of the individual fighter or crusader, bravery in the sacred indigenous teachings is not solely about being strong and being bold. It is not about standing up to evil by being ready to fight aggressively and with purpose.

Bravery has a much more subtle, and I would suggest much more dramatic, meaning in the indigenous understanding. Bravery as subtitled in these teachings is “Face All Truths.”

Can you think of a time when you were brave in that sense – that you faced all the truths given to you, perceived what was essential to do and how you should react, that you were able to learn when you thought you already knew all that there is to know in life?

Paul says to the church in Corinth: “We have spoken freely to you and opened wide our hearts to you.” Through all of their pains and uncertainties, their experience of heartache and disappointment, they were accepted, encouraged, and blessed by Paul and his fellow travellers. In short, Paul, says, “Be open to the truths we share, and be brave for the future.”

So what is the bravery of the indigenous tradition, shared in these Mohawk posters, and what does Paul mean by being brave and ready for the future?

I encourage you to think of a time when you were called upon to be brave, and how that experience and remembrance of that activity remains with you even to this day.

If you need help in seeding an idea related to that reality, let me offer three examples of what I would see as times when I was called upon to act bravely, but really I was called upon to be open to truths that are life-giving and eternal.

In 1972 I was elected Services Commissioner for the Students' Council of the University of Toronto. I was elected by one vote – the other candidate was a well-known and popular activist on the campus, and a fellow University College student. So dramatic was the failure of Seymour to win that many of his supporters walked out of the meeting in protest. Later at that same meeting the Council discussed an ongoing occupation in one of the university's buildings where people – students and faculty – were seeking daycare provisions for their children on campus. The decision was made to appoint someone from the Council to meet with the administration and seek a mediated settlement around the issues this group had presented. They promised to go nowhere until daycare was established. Of course, the person to lead that negotiated settlement was the Services Commissioner.

Now I grew up in a protected family where father worked shift work, and mother stayed at home and kept life pretty regular. I was not sure almost 50 years ago what I thought about daycare provisions myself, much less represent a group of disenchanted individuals before the University seeking daycare in the school.

So I did what any mediator would do, not knowing what mediators did back then. I met with the concerned individuals, and learned their commitment to their children, their passion for the university, and their desire for what they saw as a matter of justice and fairness for them and their children.

Then I met with the Vice President of the University, who represented the University well in terms of process, protection, policy, and a desire to seek a solution without encouraging disruption and what he saw as angry demands from unofficial groups and individuals.

A breakthrough came when I learned the University official was a member of the United Church, and we could talk about a faithful response to the situation and not just a bureaucratic one. Eventually, the sit-in ended, the University agreed to develop a daycare for students and faculty, and while the facility much smaller than needed as it became a reality, the University of Toronto has the first daycare on campus in an Ontario university.

A couple of years after that experience I was invited to participate in an exorcism. An individual who was a regular in the counselling group at the church where I was a student minister expressed the feeling of being possessed by an evil spirit. The spiritual healer who was part of the church agreed to meet with her, and asked me to be present as a helper and as a support person. Had I not been there, I would not be able to say with confidence that I experienced a sense of something spiritual or at least certainly real leaving this woman's body as Chris prayed over her, and her whole demeanour changed completely – she was back to being a confident, relaxed, hopeful person.

And the final act of bravery probably does not sound very brave to anyone here.

By the time my children were born, it was common for fathers to be in the delivery room. I was present for the birth of both of my daughters, but with Mary 40 years ago we did not have the orientation that later followed, so I was uncertain of my role beyond support

person. As Mary was born, the doctor took her into his hands, the nurse closed off the umbilical cord and cut it, and the doctor thrust her into my arms: “Okay, you take care of her now.”

I was ill prepared for the experience, as I had no idea how slimy and slippery a new child is. I held on for all that I was worth, making sure I did not drop this wiggly, oily child, until the nurse came to wrap her in a blanket and lay her on her mother’s chest.

A mediation, an exorcism, and a birth – how is bravery evident in all three situations?

Let me explain. Bravery, we are told, is “face all truths.” In a few minutes I cannot speak about “all” truths, but let me delineate three truths these stories underline.

The story of the daycare development is a story of daring to listen to people with whom we do not share similar experience, or even possibly with whom we disagree. Progress is never made by surrounding ourselves with people with whom we agree – progress is made when we are able to listen to people with whom we disagree and misunderstand, but seek new direction thanks to their input.

The second story of an exorcism reminds me, and all of us, that despite some people’s claims that the devil is in charge of the earth and leading us astray, the Spirit of God ultimately is in charge, and if we are but open to the power of the Spirit, we will always experience hope.

And the final story is that new life may be challenging and unexpected, or at least uncertain, but it is always a gift, and we should see new life as a precious gift from God. When we squelch new life, when we ignore or dismiss new energy and dynamism within our midst, we fail to be brave, for we fail to be open and alive to all truths.

Be a brave people – listen to views with which you may disagree or even dispute; remember that the Holy Spirit is a power greater than any other power, and see new life in your midst as a gift from God.

And may we balance acts of bravery with humility. Catherine will share ways that we can live with humility.

### **Catherine’s reflection on the word “Humility,” (using Psalm 133)**

I have been carrying the word “humility.” In my work with you, which has led me into deepening relationships with so many people and agencies in the downtown, I have increasingly become aware of the power of humility.

In the Mohawk tradition, humility is defined as “acting respectfully.” I have grown to understand that humility is not just about the action; it is really about the intention.

Humility is about sitting where people sit, and trying to listen deeply. Humility is owning my personal biases and prejudices and holding them up to the light of deeper inspection.

Humility is having the courage to invite people into conversation, to be curious and ask questions because I want to know more, and I am aware that there is so much in this world that I do not know or understand, but I know that I am learning.

Humility is admitting I have made a mistake, perhaps I have intruded my will or my opinion on another. I have stepped into their path in an unhelpful or a condescending way. Humility is about asking for forgiveness, accepting the apology, and moving forward together. Humility is very hard work.

But I also think that hard work may be God's work, because it calls each of us to deepened awareness of our own actions and the world's need. It is about acting respectfully and being respectful, because when I walk with humility I am seeking to see the world with holy eyes. I am looking for the best.

One of the ways these teachings have made their way into our United Church came in 2012 when the words **Akwe Nia'Tetewa:neren** were included into the United Church crest. They may be translated as "All My Relations." When we see our sisters and brothers, our neighbours, as our relations, then we begin to see possibilities rather than labels.

We see the interconnectedness of all humanity, and I just know that is the way God sees us too. When the body of a little boy, a refugee, washed up on the shore of a Mediterranean beach on the other side of the world, this church made the decision to welcome a Syrian family. All my relations.

When you learned that many tenants in this building did not have access to fresh vegetables, the Reaching Out Team started giving vegetables away. All my relations.

When someone heard that a few kids at Lansdowne School didn't have gym shoes and some kids at Queen Elizabeth School didn't have winter coats, you took some Benevolent Fund money to make it happen. All my relations.

When the downtown Off the Street Shelter opened up, you filled a van with supplies. All my relations.

When you heard that prisoners at the Sudbury Jail did not have access to library books, you jumped in with generosity and abundance. All my relations.

Thousands of years ago, the writer of Psalm 133 said the same thing... "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity."

It is, in the measure that we try to walk in unity, that we begin to resemble Jesus, and carry out God's dream in our disjointed and discordant world.

Richard Wagamese, a wise writer we have followed this year says it so much better than I ever could: "From our very first breath, we are in relationship. With that indrawn draft of air, we become joined to everything that ever was is, and ever will be."

When we exhale, we forget that relationship by virtue of the act of living. Our breath comingles with all breath, and we are a part of everything. That's the simple fact of things. We are born into a state of relationship. Big lesson? Relationships never end; they just change. In believing that lies the freedom to carry compassion, empathy, love, kindness and respect (and here I would add "humility") into and through whatever changes. We are made more by that practice.