

Fearless!
Luke 12:4-7

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I want to talk about courage today, but not just ordinary, everyday courage, as important as that is. I want to talk about *moral* courage. That's what the scripture text is all about.

Moral courage is the willingness to stand on principle, even if your ideas, opinion and actions draw scorn, rejection, attack or persecution your way.

One of the most remarkable recent portrayals of moral courage is in the Tom Hanks movie, *Bridge of Spies*. This real life story is based on attorney James Donovan who defends a convicted Russian spy. He defends him on principle, because each person deserves a defense, their day in court – even a Russian spy. In the super-heated atmosphere of the cold war this drew great animosity, for him and his family. Donovan was routinely vilified. And yet he persisted for no other reason than it was the right thing to do.

Eventually, he negotiated a trade for two Americans held by the Soviets and East Germans for the one Russian spy. He was so effective at this exchange-of-prisoners mediation that he was asked to do the same in other incendiary world situations.

The most obvious thing here is the most important: The person who stands on principle often risks complicating and worsening his/her personal life. You do the right thing and get punished for it.

Most of us know how that works if we've tried it ourselves. Just because you stand your ground and happen to be on the right side of virtue that does not mean you will be rewarded. That does not mean you will be spared suffering. In fact, you may create suffering for yourself.

I think this is important as we help shape our children's emotional and spiritual development. How many times have you heard parents tell their children today that "There are things worth fighting for, worth making sacrificing for, and sometimes doing the right thing will be very hard, make you

feel uncomfortable, sometimes lonely, and can even be painful. But it is very important that you find the courage within yourself to do it.” How often do you think that is part of the wisdom that we pass on?

In Luke’s Gospel reading this morning we receive a difficult but very important charge. He says that we should do the right thing, let the chips fall where they may, and do not fear the consequences from who can harm your physical existence. Why? Because the ones who can harm your physical existence can’t touch your soul. What you should be worried about, Luke says, is losing your soul, compromising yourself, losing your integrity. Now that is fearsome.

Instead of fearing the recriminations of others, says Luke, focus instead on pleasing God. And when you are in situations in which you are dragged before some authority to give some account of your actions, do not fear. The Spirit will intercede for you and give you what you need in the moment.

In addition to giving our children love, safety and protection, what if we also passed on that message: “Don’t worry about pleasing your peers; concentrate more on doing the right thing and pleasing God. Doing the right thing is often hard, but it brings its own reward.”

It is a truism that if one spends enough time in the church you see the full spectrum of the human nature, from saint to sinner, all mixed together. I have been so blessed through the years to see the more the saintly examples. But ever so often the beast lifts up its head and rampages through the church and it’s not pretty.

Once upon a time, a long way from here, some church leaders made some very dark decisions that involved suing a church member. The pastor was so shocked by their attitudes and behavior that he expressed his dismay and disapproval with their choice. He spoke of how the scriptures counseled against it and that there were other ways to handle the situation.

But they ignored him and proceeded with their devious plans. That pastor was chastised and vilified by those leaders for doing the right thing.

Those roles could have been changed around, of course. Anyone could have been on the side of virtue or vice. But the point is that circumstances arise in which you are called to give an account of your faith by what you do and say. It may be very unpopular. It may get you verbally spanked. You might lose your job if you are a whistle blower. But standing there in your integrity is always the right choice. That's what we have to teach to our children. No matter what is spinning in the world around you, stand for the right and good.

I had a friend, long since gone to glory, who shared a story with me one time when I was under attack for taking a certain stand on principle. He was an attorney in a small firm that represented those persons who had been wronged through medical malpractice.

He had a client who clearly had a strong case, a man who had been wronged without a doubt. His life had been irreparably damaged and the case would be one that fought against such injustice. But the insurance company defending the accused had an army of attorneys in their legal department and unlimited resources at their disposal. My friend, on the other hand, had very finite resources of people, time and money.

At one point during the trial my friend was so very discouraged and he paid a visit on his mentor, an older sage attorney who had given him council through the years. After this mentor quietly listened to his tale of woe he reached into his drawer and pulled out a key chain with a tag on it and on the tag was inscribed a saying, one that happened to come from the New Testament. It said, "The truth shall set you free." He gave it to him as they walked out. "So it shall," he said. As it goes my friend took that to heart and he continued to fight through the case, sometimes only buoyed up by that one saying, "The truth shall set you free."

The end of the story, the good ending, is that it did exactly that. His client's case prevailed.

And at the end of that story, my friend fished into his pocket and pulled out a key chain. On it was tag that read, "The truth shall set you free."

That was all I really needed to hear and it has stayed with me from that day. The truth shall set free and set you free from falsehood. If the false prevails in the short-term, vindication will arise sometime, for though the arc of justice is often a long one, it is persistent.

Do not fear those who can harm your material existence, Luke says, rather fear the state of your soul in jeopardy. Fear not what will happen to you if you speak, but what may destroy you if you remain silent.

Of course, the moral courage of one person can be contagious. In the collection of stories gathered by Yaffa Eliach (*Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*, New York: Vintage Books, 1982), the story is passed on

about a death camp prisoner, the Rabbi Israel Spire of Bluzhov. One night loud speakers announced that all prisoners were to immediately vacate the barracks. They were herded out into the large field and before them were two large trenches. The SS officers announced that they had two choices, to jump over the trenches to safety or to fall in and be killed immediately. Everyone knew that the sick or weak had no chance.

One of the good friends of the Rabbi was a man who had given up all hope and he told the Rabbi that they might as well just climb into the pits and wait for their cruel end. But the Rabbi said to him, "Pits have been dug and jump we must. If we fall, we will enter the word of truth in an instant. So we must jump."

As the two men approached the trenches, and looked down toward the unfortunate who had not made it, the Rabbi looked down at his two swollen feet, closed his eyes and whispered, "We are jumping!"

In a moment, the two opened their eyes only to find themselves standing on the other side. And the friend asked the Rabbi, “How did you do it?” And the Rabbi answered, “I was holding onto the coattails of my parents, my grandparents and great-grandparents.” And the Rabbi turned to his friend and said, “Tell me, my friend, how did you reach the other side of the pit?” And his friend replied, “I was holding on to you.”

Sometimes the courage is found deep inside ourselves, or through holding onto the coat tails of the ancestors, or by holding on to the person closest to us that we trust and admire. Moral courage is contagious. Sometimes it is found when only one person decides to jump even when the opposition seems impossible to overcome. We are jumping!

When the cause is urgent but the odds seem formidable, when the moral imperative is clear but willingness to follow through timid, when the right is clear but seems defeated by might, then is the time to fear not threats to the body but rather the state of your soul.

That is the time to trust that the truth does set us free. And when the moral courage of one is flagging it is the jumping of his neighbor that may well inspire him to do the same.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness,” says Jesus, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”(Mt 5:10)

I know, parents, what you may be thinking: Doesn't this seem a bit harsh to be teaching our children? Well I ask you: Do you want to wait until they are in the moment of testing, trying to decide whether to do the right thing, whether or not they should stand on conviction and principle, whether or not they should advocate for an unpopular opinion ... you want to wait until then to discuss what Jesus means when he says that people are blessed if they are persecuted for righteousness? Or do you want begin telling stories now about the ancestors who lived with moral courage so that they, our children, can jump by holding onto their coat tails?

What do you think?