

Courage to be Vulnerable
“Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself...”
Philippians 2:5
Jan. 3, 2021
Pastor Jenothy Irvine

Prayer: Open us God, to the teaching and truth of your word and your example. May we have courage to listen, change, and grow.

Message

What does courage look like? I think we know it when we see it, but if you were to describe it to someone, what would you say? What images come to mind? Take a look at these pictures from the New York Times piece, 2020 A Year in Pictures. I found myself captivated by many of them. I wonder what you see? Or where you might see courage.

Show photo slides, 5 sec each

I believe the power of those images is not courage, but rather, vulnerability. I believe when we see vulnerability, we see courage.

Maybe this will help. “All it takes is twenty seconds of insane courage.” So said Matt Damon’s character, Benjamin, in the movie *We Bought a Zoo*. What could you do with twenty seconds of courage? What could you be with twenty seconds of courage? There is more to that statement than you might think. The point Damon’s character was making was not so much about what is said or done in those twenty seconds, but rather, the fact that you have the courage to show up in that moment; to put

yourself out there, to take the risk not knowing the outcome. In other words, to be vulnerable.

This week we begin a new sermon series based on Paul's letter to the Philippians. It is our hope that we will all learn more about following Jesus with courage - the courage to be vulnerable, to be gracious, to be last, and to be first.

We begin then with the words of chapter 2, verses five through 11. Apparently there is a feud going on between or within the Methodist church of Phillipi. There is speculation as to what lay at the root of the argument. Some say it could have been a polarization around the two women who had worked faithfully with Paul in the past but came to odds with each other later (4:2-3). It could have been started by the preaching of those who sought to bring elements of Judaism into the faith and practice of the church, which Paul lashes out in 3:1-6. Or it could have been the case that the disunity was related to Paul himself. Some believe that Paul's insistence that he loves and prays for ALL of them in 1:4-8 implies that some members felt they were not included in Paul's favor and affection and that is why, some say, that Paul writes in 2:2, that their unity would complete his joy. Imagine that, a church arguing over who did what, or what to include in worship, or who the favorites are. Never.

Whatever the cause, the problem appears to be serious. Serious enough that Paul brings out the big guns and speaks of Jesus being the example for the church in how they are to think and act. Full of poetic cadence, beautiful imagery, and divine hope, this section brings to the

forefront what really matters. Some scholars think Paul borrowed these words from another source, and that the church would have recognized and been familiar with the words. Either way, this hymn presents an incredible picture of vulnerability and hope.

Listen then to what has become known as the “Philippian hymn.”

Read text: Phil. 2:5-11

Even before my boys were born, while I was pregnant, I started a notebook of letters to each of them. Others were messages about what we had done that day or as they grew, how we celebrated a particular milestone. Poem, song lyrics, and prayers are scattered throughout as well. Any of the longer letters you find there, usually contain a section of what I would call, “the heart of the matter.” A section that speaks a truth I want them to know and remember. Something that tells them, no matter what else you read in this book of letters, THIS is what matters most.

I believe that is what we read here in Phil. 2 It is Paul’s “what matters most” section of his letter to the church. And what matters most is that the believers not only act like Jesus, but think like Jesus as well. They are to have the same mind as Christ - to be united in how they think and in how they act. To do that they must have the courage to be vulnerable and show the world around them there is another way.

Most people think courage is being strong, resolute, and it is, but at its core, is vulnerability. The pictures we shared at the beginning would not reveal such courage had not the subject in them been vulnerable.

We can probably all think of someone in our lives who has shown courage by being vulnerable. Someone who spoke the truth when no one wanted to hear it. Shared personal stories never said before. Maybe we have done so ourselves. Yet, the world often tells us that being courageous involves being tough handed or hard hearted; that it requires superhero strength.

In the Roman Empire, divine and human power were asserted through strength, dominance, and war. Being “courageous” meant winning out over one’s opponents; showing power over others and using that power and control to gain more power and control.

Jesus on the other hand, showed ultimate courage through his vulnerability; humility, compassion, and servant leadership. It was not what people expected but it was exactly what was needed to turn ideologies, paradigms, and systems upside down in order to establish a kingdom, a church, a community, of hope, love, and peace.

This passage talks about how Jesus, who is God (“in the form of God,” “equality with God”), did not assume to be better than everyone else. Instead, he became humble, gave up the privileges of his divinity, “emptying himself” - made himself vulnerable in human existence.

That is the reality we remembered and celebrated just last week, with Christmas. Immanuel - God with us. It doesn't get more vulnerable than a baby born in a feeding trough smack dab in the middle of our human mess. That is where courage and strength prevail - in vulnerability. Jesus became vulnerable to reveal God's strength. Jesus became vulnerable to identify with our vulnerability - to show us we too find strength in him and in ourselves when we have courage to be vulnerable. In vulnerability there is healing, restoration, and growth. There is a comfort in knowing we are not the only ones struggling, empowerment in sharing our truth, and solidarity in journeying together.

Paul used this hymn to teach those early followers who were in conflict among themselves and with outside groups. Paul is advising them to have everyone's interest in mind, as Jesus did, rather than trying to prove themselves right or better than anyone else. It's not about you and me, it's about we. It's not about us and them, it's about all.

Paul is telling them and us to have the courage to be vulnerable. Courage to remember what we are about as a church and people of God. Courage to be united when being divided is easier. Courage to admit when we are wrong or don't have all the answers. Courage to accept, even welcome the strangers among us. Courage to love and let love. Courage to surrender control sometimes. Courage to say, "me too," and trust God anyway. Courage to fall down and to let someone help you back up. Courage to allow brokenness to reveal God's wholeness. Courage to say, "I am only human."

Here comes the scary but exhilaratingly beautiful part. Having the courage to be vulnerable is risky - vulnerability wouldn't be vulnerability if it didn't involve risk. It's been said that courage is showing up in the arena of life - whatever arena it is: work, school, church, family, relationships, zoom calls, new beginnings, and old barriers. Courage is showing up in those places and moments not knowing what the outcome will be and doing the hard thing anyway.

Which takes us back to our "20 seconds of insane courage." I wonder what God could do with 20 seconds of your courageous vulnerability? I wonder what it would look like to live each day with courageous vulnerability? What would your relationships look like? How would you grow and change? Where would God take you? I wonder what more this church could do with those who have the courage to be vulnerable? Finally, I wonder what your faith could do with courageous vulnerability?

Are you willing to find out?

AMEN