

Sermon 031818 Courage  
Scripture Mark 14: 66-72  
Sermon Title- Are You Brave?

The recent horrific story of the mass shooting at the high school in Parkman, FL, had an interesting sub-plot. An armed deputy sheriff was outside the school, heard the gun fire, and did not enter the school. Some very prominent people called him a coward.

I saw an interview with a veteran who had been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, our nation's highest military honor for actions he took in Afghanistan. That man knows a lot about courage. He was asked what he would have done in that situation. He said that he would set the perimeter. He said that if he went inside and was shot the shooter would now have his weapon and ammo along with what the shooter brought. He would have done what the deputy sheriff did.

He was asked if it was wrong to call him a coward. He said, "Yes." Now, I'm buying this medal winner's view because he has been in situations that take courage and he has shown courage. Anyone who has not been in a situation like he had been in or the school shooting cannot know what he or she would have done. There is a complicated competition in each of us between cowardice and courage.

Saving Private Ryan is one of the greatest movies ever made. There is a scene on a staircase in which an American soldier is frozen with fear and unable to shoot a German soldier. I've seen that movie a

number of times and asked myself, “Would that be me?” Because I’ve never been in combat, I don’t know how I would act. I admit that I did have empathy for that soldier. He did, in a later scene, get his bearings and shot a German soldier whom he was trying to capture.

My brother is a combat veteran. He was a Marine. He was in combat in the Viet Nam War. Joe said that courage is not the absence of fear, it is overcoming fear. His son was in a helicopter in the biggest battle of the Gulf War in 1995. He described the scene to me of the horrific pitched battle. I asked him if he was afraid. He said, “Of course I was scared. It was also the most exciting thing that ever happened to me. But I had a job to do.” Courage is not the absence of fear, it is overcoming fear.

In our gospel lesson this morning, Peter yielded to the temptation of fear. Remember, Peter was the disciple who was probably closest to Jesus. He denied knowing Jesus three times before the rooster crowed on the day of Jesus’ crucifixion and death. He was afraid to admit to knowing Jesus from fear of what might happen to him.

Even Jesus had a momentary lapse. Time was drawing near for Jesus to be crucified and killed. While praying in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said, “Pass this cup from me, but thy will be done.” I love that scene. In that moment, Jesus was so intensely human. We can relate to him in that moment as fellow humans. It is tougher to

relate to Jesus when he displays his divine powers, it is easy to worship him but he's not necessarily easy to relate to on human terms. Another intensely human moment for Jesus is in the shortest verse in Scripture, "Jesus wept."

So, the temptation of yielding to fear is an intensely human experience, shared even by the Lord, even if his was only momentary. It is also true that the overcoming of fear and showing courage is an intensely human endeavor.

Scripture can help us, here. We know that we are not alone in this struggle. I have mentioned that the most common phrase that appears in Scripture is, "Do not be afraid." It is helpful to remember that when in those situations.

The truth is that Scripture can bring us only so far. We all have to dig deep into our reservoirs to find courage. Especially, in those moments that are surprising and chaotic. In a real sense, we are very much alone in those moments. I think if we pass the courage test a first time, it will not be so difficult in subsequent times.

I would like to address a temptation of another sort that we are prone to. I talked about it in the opening of this sermon. That is being judgmental of others. It is easy to point the accusing finger of someone being a coward when we don't know the full story.

It is easy to point the finger calling someone a racist, or lazy, or untrustworthy, or cheap. When we demonize others, we are causing polarization, which is what we have done in the public discourse in this country.

Demonizing opposing political parties, or the media, or certain media outlets cripples our ability to get anything done in this country. It's not just on the macro scale of national politics.

I have talked to you before about a landmark book by a great Jewish philosopher named Martin Buber. The book is *I and Thou*. In the book, Buber compares 'I It' relationships to 'I Thou' relationships.

The example I use is mine, not Buber's. Say you go into a restaurant for lunch. Your waitress takes too long to come to you. She seems distracted. She forgets to bring you the water that you requested. She brings you regular coffee instead of the decaf you asked for. Your sandwich arrives on white bread instead of the wheat that you ordered. In an 'I It' relationship, you get angry and decide to stiff her on the tip or maybe even complain to the manager. You treat her like a vending machine that you kick if you put your money in and it does not give you what you want.

In an 'I Thou' relationship, you think, well, maybe she has a sick kid at home or she just got a bad diagnosis or a parent is sick and dying

or any number of possibilities. 'I thou' means that you consider the whole person and do not judge.

In another book that I read recently, *The Wisest One in the Room*, it says that wise people do not judge others. I think we can all use a little wisdom.

Jesus said, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." They all put their stones down and left. Let us all learn that lesson and have the courage to stand up to temptation. AMEN