

## **SCREEN: courage**

What is courage?

How would you define it?

Here's a definition from Webster's Dictionary:

*courage is the mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty. (repeat)*

I love this definition.

It says so much.

Here's another take on courage that I heard a few years back:

*courage is NOT the ABSENCE OF FEAR,  
but acting IN SPITE OF FEAR.*

See, we can wrongly assume that if you're courageous, you're fear-LESS.

But it's not true.

Talk to anyone in uniform, any first responder, or someone who stepped up in an emergency and they'll tell you:

*I was afraid....sure I was scared....  
but I did what I had to do.*

They withstood the danger, and acted in spite of their fear.

Over the past two weeks, stories of courage have emerged from the shootings in El Paso and Dayton.

## **SCREEN: Glendon Oakley photo**

Like the story of Glendon Oakley in El Paso.

He's 22 years old, a private first class who had just returned from duty in Kuwait.

When Glendon heard gunshots at the WalMart he ran toward the chaos.

He and another man began carrying children to safety.

Glendon said afterwards, *"I simply did what I was supposed to do."*

## **SCREEN: Jeremy Ganger photo**

In Dayton it was Jeremy Ganger, who was working the front door of the club the gunman was heading towards.

Jeremy pulled people into his club and stood his ground, determined the shooter was not going to get past him easily and he didn't.

If not for Jeremy, many more would have perished.

These are just two stories.

So many others did courageous things at the time and in the days that followed: sheltering people, caring for the wounded, donating blood, supporting families.

Many offered prayers, still others rallied demanding changes to our gun laws.

*Courage: the strength to persevere and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty.*

### **SCREEN: The Classics main screen**

Our summer message series is titled, The Classics.

We are hearing bible stories we first heard as kids but have heard many times over the years.

Today we heard some courageous stories about what it means to live our faith.

No doubt about it, the prophets of scripture were very courageous.

They were God's spokesmen, his messengers.

Any time the people got off track in their faith,

God sent a messenger to call them back.

Prophets were unpopular because people didn't like being told they were wrong and needed to change.

The story of Jeremiah - in our first reading today - shows us what courage requires.

God instructed Jeremiah to go tell the king he was wrong and that because he'd led the people astray, foreign enemies will come and destroy the nation.

Not a message to win friends!

To publicly challenge the king could lead to death.

But Jeremiah knew he had a mission from God  
and he could not remain silent.

The king's princes threw Jeremiah down a well to shut him up.

They were hoping he would die there.

Today we heard that one man named Ebed-melech, a court official,  
had the courage to confront the king on behalf of Jeremiah.

He said this:

**SCREEN: "My lord king,  
these men have been at fault  
in all they have done to the prophet Jeremiah,  
casting him into the cistern.  
He will die of famine on the spot,  
for there is no more food in the city."**

So the king ordered that Jeremiah be taken out of the well  
and the prophet was spared.

Jeremiah and the court official both knew the danger and risk in  
challenging authority, in confronting injustice and speaking an unpopular message.

But remember the definition of courage:

*the strength to persevere and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty.*

Where did their courage come from?

Was it something they were born with, a natural ability?

No. It was a gift from God; a gift of faith.

But they had to choose to practice their faith in a courageous way.

In the Gospel today, when Jesus talked about the effect his message  
would have on the world, he used some terrifying images.

Said, *"I have come to set the earth on fire!*

*I've come for division."*

Jesus wasn't an arsonist; he wasn't speaking literally.

But like gold is tested in the fire to burn away impurities,  
Jesus was saying that his Gospel, his message,  
has the power to free his followers from anything that stands in the way of  
being courageous witnesses of his truth.

The truth of Jesus's message is so challenging  
that many refused to accept it.

It led to division even within families.

Jesus's followers found encouragement in the stories  
of Jeremiah and the prophets.

And when they were persecuted for preaching the Gospel,  
it was comforting to know that Jesus said it would happen.

**SCREEN: a father will be divided against his son  
and a son against his father,  
a mother against her daughter,  
and a daughter against her mother,  
a mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law  
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.**

So if they tried to murder the prophets for speaking the truth,  
Jesus and his followers could expect the same.

I am sure some who might have wanted to join him  
had second thoughts when hearing this.

If Jesus had toned down this message or skipped it entirely  
he'd have had more followers.

But he couldn't do it.

Like a true prophet, Jesus had to be faithful to his mission,  
even if it meant some would turn away.

But those who did become disciples were truly committed;  
were willing to sacrifice themselves and  
showed great courage in sharing the Good News;

even when facing death for their faith.

If they'd given up, if they hadn't been willing to sacrifice,  
Christianity would have died out.

Instead, the movement of Jesus grew because people saw  
the dedication of the disciples and their willingness to  
face rejection; to undergo imprisonment, torture and death.

As one writer from the early church wrote:

*the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church!*

When people saw that these disciples were  
willing to die for Christ,  
they decided it must be something worth living for.

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So let me ask you,

do you consider yourself courageous when it comes to living your faith?

What sacrifices would you endure for the Gospel?

Would you go to prison for your faith?

Would you risk having your loved ones turn away by taking  
a stand that is unpopular or risky?

Would you die for your faith?

The first disciples of Jesus

had to answer these questions every single day.

We probably won't ever face the dangers they faced.

No, the greatest danger facing us is the one Jesus warned about  
in last week's Gospel.

Remember his parable about servants in a household awaiting their master's return?

He said, *don't grow lax or lazy when it comes to your faith.*

*Be a faithful servant by boldly living and sharing your faith every day.*

Like Jesus's first followers, the Lord is asking you to be a prophet;  
to be willing to let others see your faith.

What might this look like for you in practical terms?

I think it begins in prayer.

When you pray, be open to really listening to God.

Ask the Lord,

*“where are you sending me? Who do you want me to share your message with?”*

When you listen for God’s answer, pay attention to repetition.

Because if the same issue or same name keeps coming to your mind;  
that’s God calling you to do something.

As I said last week, it can mean taking a stand against  
those things in our world that threaten life -

whether it’s gun violence,

the treatment of migrants,

or other issues.

God may be asking you to bring about real change in our world.

For someone here, it will mean summoning up the courage

to have a difficult conversation with a family member,

a friend or co-worker rather than avoiding the issue;

and rather than talking about the person behind their back or on Facebook.

The greatest question for you from today’s readings isn’t,

*“Are you willing to die for Christ?”* it’s,

*“Are you willing to live for Christ?”*

It’s a question only you can answer.

Your answer is how you live your life every day.

But whenever you live your faith and others see it,

you are taking a bold and courageous stand for Christ and

helping His Kingdom grow.

Today as we celebrate our parish feast day,

my prayer is that the Lord would deepen our faith by giving us

the courage of the prophets and

the dedication of Jesus's first followers.

And in the words of our second reading today,

let us persevere in running the race which lies ahead.

May we never grow weary or lose heart,

but remain strong by keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus.

Amen. +