

Profiles in courage

John 12:20-33

March 29, 2009

So, tell me, who is the most courageous person you know?

Let me tell you about a few courageous people I know ...

Jean Kimball is a courageous person. Eight or ten years ago, Jean almost died. She had intra-cranial bleeding and was in a coma for some months. We didn't know if she would ever come out of the coma or what kind of shape she would be in if she did.

Would you have courage enough to live after you almost died? I think you would! But maybe you or maybe I would pull back, pull in, live more cautiously, live more carefully, not risk doing anymore the things we might once have done.

But Jean continues to live fully and eagerly and with undimmed curiosity. Even after her own illness, even after the death of her husband, Jack, she still enjoys a good challenge, a good discussion, a good story. She still finds joy in life, in her life as it is.

Courage is embracing life as it is and living it to the fullest as it is, instead of dwelling on what it is not or what it is no more.

Carol Driver is a courageous person. She was diagnosed several years ago with multiple myeloma, a particularly enigmatic and potent cancer. She lives with an uncertain future and a daunting present, her body subjected to the energy-draining effects of the various therapies she must undergo. She endures suffering and is surely tempted by doubt.

Where would a life like that, a lot like that, leave you? Bitter? Filled with self-pity? Withdrawn?

But Carol lives honestly and hopefully, with patience and endurance, still outgoing, still caring, still very much ... herself! She has a steady faith and a steady spirit.

Courage is embracing life as it is and living it to the fullest as it is, instead of living with bitterness and self-pity, instead of living with regret and denial. Courage is engaging life as it is, instead of running away from it or hiding in a corner.

My son, Matt Ensworth, is a courageous person. He has had courage enough ... to change, not resigning himself to where he came from or to what he was, not letting the history of bad choices -- either made against him or made by him -- determine who he is now.

It takes courage to change, to leave behind the bitterness of an unfair childhood, to take responsibility for rejecting love that was fair and genuine, to admit your mistakes and admit your needs, to make reconciliation, to be willing to go back and make things right, to choose a new way, a way of commitment and humility and honesty and faith and accountability.

Courage is embracing life as it is and choosing to live it to the fullest as it can be. Courage is walking among the ghosts of the past, but refusing to be intimidated by them or to be dismayed by them or to give in to them. Courage is remembering ... who you are!

This is what courage is.

Courage is not the absence of fear and doubt. Courage is the strength of heart that allows you to move forward in the face of fear and doubt.

Courage is not about performing daring deeds or taking on risky adventures. Courage is meeting life as it comes to you with resolve and purpose and commitment and gratitude and expectation.

You never need to go looking for a challenge. It will always find you. Courage is facing the challenge, embracing life as it comes, choosing to live in it as it is, but choosing to do with it what you are meant to do, what you are called to do. Courage is living your life instead of letting it live you.

That's the kind of courage Jesus had.

"Now my heart is troubled," Jesus said. Jesus was troubled, too. Courage is not the absence of fear and doubt.

"What shall I say? Shall I say, 'Father do not let this hour come upon me'? The hour, the hour of suffering, comes upon him. His destiny comes to him. Jesus doesn't go looking for trouble. It comes to him.

"But this is why I came -- so that I might go through this hour of suffering." Jesus embraced his life as it was and resolved to fulfill what he was called to do. Courage is meeting life as it comes to you with resolve and purpose and commitment.

And Jesus calls us to follow him. “Whoever wants to serve me must follow me, so that my servant will be with me where I am.” We are called to follow him ... into a life of obedience to God’s will, into a life of service to our neighbors, into a life that will include suffering. It will take courage to follow. But that is what we are promised!

*You promise to all who trust you
forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,
courage in the struggle for justice and peace ...*

Courage in the struggle for justice and peace ...

We are promised courage. Not success, but courage. Not freedom from difficulty and suffering and threat, but courage. Not a happy life, but courage.

We are promised courage in the struggle.

Life as it is is a struggle. There is still a gap between life as it is and life as God intends it, between what this world is and what it will be when God makes all things new. Even when we faithfully choose to do what God calls us to do, the outcome is uncertain. Life is a struggle, demanding of us resolve and endurance and patience and constant hope.

We are promised courage in the struggle for justice and peace.

Justice and peace are what God intends for this earth, for this universe, for all humanity. Justice and peace are the ends for which Jesus lived, the ends for which Jesus died. Justice and peace, in the biblical context, are not really two separate ends, but two facets of a single end, two aspects of a single reality.

Justice is redressing wrongs, ending oppression, respecting life, empowering the weak and enriching the poor. Peace is wholeness of spirit and body, fullness of life, reconciliation between enemies, reconciliation with God.

Justice is no one left behind, no one left out, no one pretending to be more or made to be less than they are. Justice is walking in God’s way. Peace is no one ignored, no one pushed aside, living with each other, enjoying each other, together enjoying God.

We are promised courage in the struggle for justice and peace.

Courage is God’s promise, courage is God’s gift, to those ... in the struggle!
Courage is not just a general blessing, but a directed blessing for those in the

struggle for justice and peace. When you are in the struggle, when you are in the struggle for justice and peace, God will give you courage.

But let's be clear! You will never have to go looking for the struggle for justice and peace. It will find you! You simply have to be willing to embrace it, to answer God's call to do justice and to love mercy and to make peace, to enter into the struggle instead of running from it. And when you do, God will give you courage.

Courage like this ...

Ralph Lazo was an American of Mexican and Irish descent, raised in Los Angeles in the 20's and 30's and 40's in an ethnically diverse neighborhood. After bombing of Pearl Harbor, his friends of Japanese descent and their families were carted off to concentration camps. And Ralph went with them! He was not Japanese, but he joined them in the camp, to share their fate with them. One of his Japanese friends said of him,

... he knew the camps were wrong. This is the reason he came into our camp. He thought if his buddies are going to camp, he wanted to experience it. Sixteen years old and he leaves his family, not knowing what was going to happen ...

Ralph remained in the internment camps for almost three years, leaving only when he was drafted. He served in the Pacific theater, and was awarded the Bronze Star.

You promise courage in the struggle for justice ...

Raven Thundersky is a Canadian aborigine. Her sister died some years ago of asbestos poisoning at age 35. Later she lost her mother and three more sisters to asbestos poisoning. Her father and brother are also ill now with the same disease, as is she.

Her family, and other aboriginal families like hers, were forcibly moved out of their self-built homes and relocated in government housing, housing built with asbestos, even when the risks of asbestos poisoning were already well-known. She has taken up the cause of justice, suing the Canadian government and the company that supplied the asbestos. She courageously advocates for justice, stands up to the powers, finding strength and courage in her faith. She says,

I used to go to bed angry. [Now] I can go to bed at night and thank God for a wonderful day. I don't go to bed vowing revenge on the people who did

me wrong. Life is a miracle. You can go through just about anything and know you can make it ...

You promise courage in the struggle for justice ...

Desmond Doss was a conscientious objector. He served with the army in World War II, but because of his faith he would not fire a weapon or carry a weapon or even train with a weapon. He was ridiculed and teased and harassed because of his beliefs. But he was one of only two conscientious objector ever to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

In May, 1945 on Okinawa, after his unit encountered a barrage of Japanese mortar and rifle fire, [he] was stranded on an escarpment with about 75 wounded GIs. Working slowly and doggedly under continuous enemy fire, Doss dragged each man to the edge of the cliff, tied him in a rope sling and lowered him to safety. One by one, he rescued them all. Two weeks later, in another bitter fight, Doss rescued his badly wounded company commander ... who stated, "He saved my life. The man I tried to have kicked out of the Army ended up being the most courageous person I've ever known. How's that for irony?"

You promise courage in the struggle for peace ...

These are all people of courage, people who stood up courageously for justice and for peace, people who didn't go looking for a struggle, but entered into the struggle when it came to them.

And you? What will you do when the struggle for justice and peace comes to where you are? Will you enter into the struggle? Or will you do your best to stay out the way? Will you do what God calls you to do? Or will you take the path of least resistance and least risk? Will you follow Jesus? Or will you follow everybody else?

If you do choose to follow, if you do choose to enter into the struggle for justice and peace, you won't have to worry about enough courage. God will give you the courage. That's God's promise!