

## GRATITUDE FOR COURAGE

Week #5 of a 6-Week "Gratitude" Series

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Okay; you ready? So can you imagine that there may be a spiritual quality that isn't fully embraced? A spiritual quality that sometimes goes unnoticed? And the quality I'm speaking of tonight is courage.

And we think about courage in the big events of life. But I think courage is a lot more about the day-in-and-day-out how we choose to live.

There's a line in Superman where Superman is speaking to Lois Lane and he says, "*There's a superhero in all of us. You just need to put on your cape.*" Right?

And there's something like a ritual. When we remember that there's a superhero in all of us, that we actually have a ritual of thinking about those moments in our lives where we know that we're up against something -- where there's a need; a challenge; a problem. And we know that we are facing that challenge head on. And I think it's helpful in those moments to take a moment and imagine putting your cape on! That we have a way of reminding ourselves that there's a superhero in all of us, but we have to remember it! We have to have that little ritual that allows us to button up at the top of our neck and we can see our superhero cape flowing down behind us.

And in those moments, we need something to remind us that there's a power within us that is greater than any event. But we have to have the courage to face the situation! Because it doesn't really help us if there's a power greater than any situation if we don't have the courage to face the situation.

So it takes both the power within us and the courage to step into the moment that causes transformation. Life requires courage.

See, one of the things that we believe in this world is that we should never be afraid. We have this concept that we should never, ever, ever be afraid. And when we are afraid, we think that something is radically wrong. And I'd like to make a stab at a new idea: that I don't think it's possible to be in this world and not, from time to time, be afraid. And I think, as we make allowances and the realization that we are going to be afraid -- when we make peace with our fears; that we are going to be afraid -- then it's really a matter of: How are we going to manage through the fears? Because some of us are spending so much time thinking that we shouldn't be afraid that it's just wasted energy.

I believe that, when we come into this three-dimensional form, and we don't feel God the same way that we do on the other side, that it's absolutely completely natural from moment-after-moment for us to sometimes be afraid. Because on the other side, there is no fear, because you're always in the presence of God. But the moment you make the choice to come into three-dimensional form, God becomes more abstract. And so we have the fear that comes from wanting and needing that presence and that power, but not always feeling it's as close as we would like it to be.

In our neighborhood ... We have a cute little neighborhood. Our neighborhood is a lot of seniors. And we have a couple of cute little families that we have snuck in. [Congregants laugh] And one of our favorite little families is a little boy and a little girl. And he's about 5 and she's about 18 months. And those of you who have seen pictures of my dogs -- I have two big dogs. And the little boy is a little reluctant to go and move straight into these dogs. Because these dogs just want to lick them up one side and down the other, right? They would never hurt them; they just think they're a big old treat. And the more the lick them, the happier they are!

And the little 18-month-old girl has no fear. She'll just run up the driveway. And so there's two dogs running one direction, a little muppet about 18 months running the other. And it's like all these eyes are trying to grab things and parts to try to keep them apart, and none of them want to be anywhere but completely just surrounded in this big puppy pile.

And the little boy kind of grabs his mom's leg. And then when he's convinced it's safe, he slowly kind of cheats his way into the circle. And his sister is just giggling and howling, and the dogs are ... there's saliva everywhere. [Congregants laugh] And it's ... She loves it!

And I want you to see that that fear is really not a problem. That sometimes there's moments in life where we want to just jump right in. And there's moments where we want to take it slow.

In Isaiah 41:10 it says, *"Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."*

And so there's this promise that God will be with us always. That God is always with us always. But we have to call forth the courage it takes to be fully present in life.

I came across this story this week. And it's the story of a high school girl in her freshman year. Science class. First year; first week. And she forgets her homework assignment. And her science professor, Mr. Sneider, says when she asks if she can turn it in tomorrow, *"Only if you stand on my lab table in front of the entire room and sing 'Joy to the World.'"*

She looked him in the eye. She smiled. She pushed back her chair. She proceeded to the front of a silent room with 25 sets of eyes on her back, many of them belonging to students that she had not yet met. She climbed on the high black table, stood in her Madonna-inspired outfit with a mesh bow and a badly permed hair (because it was 1986) ... [Congregants laugh] She took a deep breath and proceeded to belt out every verse to "Jeremiah Was a Bullfrog." [Congregants laugh] And her fellow students gave her a standing ovation.

Winston Churchill said, *"Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue as that virtue is being tested."* That whatever is going on in your life, it is completely normal from time to time for you to be afraid. It's completely normal! But we have to call forth the courage of God within us to move through those moments so that we don't become small and bitter in those moments.

I often hear people say that God is testing us. I don't think that's how it works at all! I think our soul -- in those moments -- is calling us to be greater than we think we can be. To live larger and more faithfully and not to shrink into the smallest version of ourselves.

Courage is the power that allows us to be greater than we believe that we can be. And there are so many moments that require that we button up our little cape and be courageous. When our partner dies, and we must decide if we have the courage to keep living. When a loved one is diagnosed with a life-threatening condition, and we have to decide if we have the courage to live in faith or to live in fear. When everyone around us is saying "Yes," but to be honest with ourselves, we have to say "No." That requires courage. There are moments that take profound courage to be joyful, to believe, to get out of bed, to try again, to forgive, to do that which we've never done before, to survive a break-up, to live with pain. Those moments require great courage.

*"Thank God for courage."*

Will you say that with me?

[With congregation:] *"Thank God for courage!"*

See, this season I'm doing those spiritual qualities that I really want to thank God for. That I want to acknowledge that God is at work in these moments. And I want us to bring to light courage and the power that courage has. The need for courage to live our greatest spiritual life. Because without courage, we live small, little lives. And with courage, we will confront our own fears. We will confront our own obstacles. We will confront our own situations. And we will live in the fullness of God!

But it's courage. Courage is a requirement to be here present on this earth.

How many of you have at least one area in your life that, right now, is taking all the courage you have to move through that obstacle? Anybody else? I mean, it takes courage! And when we don't acknowledge it -- when we don't realize how much courage it takes for us to get out of bed or to be as great as we were born to be -- then we kind of dismiss it. We miss the moment.

*"Thank God for courage!"*

There's a chief science officer meQuilibrium, Dr. Andrew Dr. Shatté. And he broke courage down into four dimensions: the physical, social, moral and creative.

He said the first was **physical courage**: it's to embrace the challenge in front of you. He said when your brain enters into a threatened state, it triggers "fight or flight" response and that you actually can't tell if the challenge is psychological or spiritual or a saber-toothed tiger. That your brain handles them all the same, and that we have to get comfortable the courage within us to embrace those challenges. And every challenge that is before us requires courage! It requires it!

For you to be the best version of yourself, it requires courage.

**Social courage**. We have a fear of rejection. One study from the University of California showed that rejection activates the same region of the brain as the trigger response for "fight or flight." When that girl was walking up to that lab table, do you think she was afraid? First year, high school; can you imagine she might have been a little afraid? Can you imagine every other student in that classroom was at, some level, as horrified as she was? [Congregants laugh] Because we all have that compassion, right? We all have that sense!

And when she got up and sang that song, there was something in every student -- that level of courage was activated in every student. Watching someone go through and confront their greatest fear and do it anyway. You know, Susan Jeffers wrote the book some 30 years ago: *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*.

And then there's **moral courage**. To think for yourself. Moral courage involves standing for what we believe to be true. There was a psychological study that found that, under pressure, 75% of the participants would conform their belief to the accepted norm. Seventy-five percent would conform their belief to what others expected them to believe. Seventy-five percent were willing to give up doing what they thought was right to conform to the room. Seventy-five percent!

If we're going to change this planet -- if we're going to change the world -- we have to have the courage to stand up for what we believe! We have to have the moral capacity to say what's true for us.

And the final one is the **courage of creativity**. Creativity is having the bravery to think outside the box. To go and to live your life the way you believe it is.

There's another story I came across, and it's about a young man who went to a spiritual teacher and asked his teacher if he could teach them how to no longer be afraid. And his teacher said to him, *"I will teach you only with one condition: for one month, you have to live in a big city and tell every person that you meet on your way that you're a coward. You will have to say it loudly, openly and look them straight in the person's eyes."*

The person got very sad [laughs], because that task seemed to be very scary to him. For a couple of days he was so sad that he thought he could never do it. But he lived with cowardice, and it was unbearable.

So he traveled to a big city. At first, meeting the first passer-by, he was speechless. The words just literally would not come out of his mouth. He couldn't look them in the eye. But he needed to finish his master's task, so he began to overcome himself.

When he came up to the next person to tell them that he was a coward, he could barely get the words out. But his voice sounded a little louder and more confident with every passing day. Suddenly came the moment when the man caught himself thinking that he wasn't scared anymore. The further he continued doing the master's task, the more convinced he was that fear had abandoned him. The way his mouth had passed, the person would come by and he actually could say it and look them straight in the eye.

He went to his master and said, *"Thank you, teacher, for I have finished your task. Now I am not afraid anymore. But how did you know that this strange task would help me?"*

*"The thing is that cowardice,"* the teacher said, *"is only a habit. And by doing the thing that scares you, you can destroy the stereotype and come to a conclusion that you can do all things. And now you know that bravery is also a habit. And if you want to make bravery a part of yourself, you need to move forward into the fear. Into fear! And then fear will go away, and bravery will take its place."*

Like, what are you afraid of? What is the challenge or the situation that has called you to play small? Because that's a reality for all of us in one way or another. A situation arises in our life, and we think, "Well, I'll just get a little smaller. I'll just become a little less of who I am. And I can become just a little less and a little less." Thinking that if we become small enough, we won't feel the fear.

But the reality is that, the smaller we become, the more the fear encases us in limitations.

So I have statements that I invite you to say with me as we move into this *"Thank you, God, for courage."*

The first one is: ***"I claim my power and I refuse to give it away."***

Together: [with congregation] *"I claim my power and I refuse to give it away."*

One more time: [with congregation] *"I claim my power and I refuse to give it away."*

***"I live my life openly and brightly."***

Together: *"I live my life openly and brightly."*

***"I refuse to live small."***

Together: [with congregation] *"I refuse to live small."*

***"I regularly ask for what I want, need, desire and dream."***

Together: [with congregation] *"I regularly ask for what I want, need, desire and dream."*

And five: ***"I am worthy of all the blessings of God."***

Together: [with congregation] *"I am worthy of all the blessings of God."*

Today, where in your life are you being asked to live with more courage? And I absolutely believe we all are! There's moments where we have allowed ourselves to be smaller than we were born to be. And it truly takes courage to live a spiritual life. It takes courage to be in three-dimensional form. It takes

courage to interact with the people around us. It takes courage to honor what God has placed within our soul. It takes courage to live.

And without courage, we just get so small. And yet, we can never get small enough.

Today, where do you need to live with more courage? Where do you need to call upon the power of God within you to move and to do that which God intends for you to do?

*"I am courageous."*

Will you say that with me?

[With congregation:] *"I am courageous!"*

Will you pray with me?

And I invite you to open your mind and your heart to the power of God within you. God is right there! God stands right next to you! The infinite Presence and Power surrounds and enfolds you! The power of God moves through you!

And yet, today, we need to call upon the courage to take the next step. Courage is a requirement to change our life. Courage is a requirement to heal, to transform, to move our planet forward. Courage is a requirement to express all that God is.

So in the name and through the power of the Living Christ, we give thanks. And so it is. Amen.

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