

## What is Courage?

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Luke 3:1-6

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent - December 6, 2015

The Rev. Dr. Ritva H. Williams



**[SLIDE 27]** Vicar Luci and I have been reading Brene Brown's book *The Gifts of Imperfection* in which she explores our Advent themes of hope, courage, joy, and love. Last Sunday I applied her definition of hope as a thought process of setting goals, having the tenacity and perseverance to pursue them, and trusting in our capacity to accomplish what we desire, to my dad's lifelong struggle to with polio and post-polio syndrome.

Today our focus is on courage. Brene Brown reminds us that the root of the word courage is the Latin word *cor*, which means heart. Courage originally meant "to speak one's mind by telling all one's heart." She asserts that we have lost touch with this idea that speaking honestly and openly about who we are, about what we're feeling, and about our experiences (good and bad) is the definition of courage. We tend to think of courage as being heroic — of being willing to put one's life on the line. Ordinary courage is about putting our vulnerability on the line.

Brene Brown points to examples of ordinary courage in everyday life.

She sees ordinary courage when a student in one of her classes raises her hand and says, "I'm completely lost. I have no idea what you're talking about." Anyone who has taught for a living knows that if there is one student brave enough to do this there are probably half dozen or more students who feel the same way, and who will benefit from that person's bravery.

In our culture helping someone else is a virtue, but asking for help is often seen as weakness. To ask for help makes us appear weak and needy, it makes us feel vulnerable. Asking for help when we genuinely need it can be the most courageous thing we can do.

Brene points to her daughter's courage when she called from a slumber party at 10:30pm and asked to be picked up because she was too homesick to stay overnight. And again the following morning at breakfast when her daughter asked, "I have another slumber party next weekend. Would you be willing to pick me up at bedtime? I'm just not ready."

So many of us have bought into the idea that we have to meet the expectations of our friends and families, or live up to media projections of what it means to cool or sophisticated or ... It takes

courage to confess that we are not ready, or may never be able to live up to those expectations, or that in order to be true to ourselves we won't even try.

Brene Brown witnessed another example of ordinary courage at her son's preschool holiday music presentation. A mother who got stuck in traffic arrived after the performance was over, just as everyone was leaving. As this mother stood at the door frantically scanning the room to find her daughter, another mother walked by, looked straight at this stressed out woman, shook her head and rolled her eyes. Another mom came up, patted her on the arm and said, "We've all been there. I missed the last one. I wasn't just late. I completely forgot." The second mom said, "My son was the only one who wasn't wearing pajamas on PJ day — he still tells me it was the most rotten day ever. It will be okay. We're all in the same boat." The moms who stopped and shared their stories of imperfection and vulnerability were practicing ordinary courage, and in doing so helped to calm the mom who got stuck in traffic.

Brene Brown concludes that ordinary courage has a ripple effect, it makes the world a little kinder and a littler braver.<sup>1</sup>

By now, you're probably wondering what this has to do with preparing for the coming of Christ in this Advent season. Well let's take a look at our Scripture lessons for today.

**[STEP 1]** The prophet Malachi proclaims, "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple ... But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi, and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness."



The refining of gold and silver involves crushing or grinding the ore, applying extremely high levels of heat, and adding chemical washes of borax and soda ash to remove impurities. In the final processes other elements and metals are added to strength and stabilize the end product. This is how scripture describes the work of God-Christ-Holy Spirit in our world, in our communities, in our churches, in our homes, and in our hearts. Refining and purifying our hearts, our minds, our habits, our lifestyles to recover and strengthen the precious image and likeness of God that is at the core of who each one of us is. Does it require courage to submit ourselves to God's refining work in our lives? Of course it. It requires us to be honest and open about who we are, what we're feeling, and our life experiences, both good and bad. How can the purifying take place if we don't admit there are impurities? How can the refining occur if we don't acknowledge the brokenness and sin in our lives?

---

<sup>1</sup> Brene Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, pp. 12-13.



[STEP 2] In Zechariah’s spirit-inspired song, he speaks of his newborn son John as going before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. God’s mercy will dawn from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide their feet into the way of peace (Luke 1:76-79). Salvation comes

through the forgiveness of sins. God’s mercy empowers those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death to walk in the way of peace. When he grows up, John appears in the wilderness beyond the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John calls the people to repent — to think again, to turn around, to change the landscape of their lives and communities: to fill the valleys, level the mountains, straighten what is crooked, and smooth out the rough spots. John’s poetic imagery about road construction makes the same point at Malachi’s metaphor about refining and purifying gold and silver. Both point to God’s life-changing work that will enable all flesh — not just all people but all of creation — to see and experience salvation (Luke 3:1-6).

[STEP 3] The Greek word *aphesis* that is translated in our texts as forgiveness literally means release, liberate, set free. Sins are those things that we do which harm others. Sins are those things that we fail to do which would benefit others if we did them. Sins are those harmful things that others do to us. Sins are those helpful and loving things that others ought to do for us but don’t. Sins are those cultural systems and social structures that enable some persons to flourish at the expense of others. Sins are those prejudices and attitudes that label, demean and marginalize certain people because of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, size, poverty... We are all simultaneously sinners and victims of sin, or as the traditional words of the confession put it we are all in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. What God in Christ offers is forgiveness that we experience as no longer being controlled by the past, release from emotional ties to people who have hurt us, liberation from our own bitterness and hate, and the freedom to become whole and enjoy the fullness of life. As Nelson Mandela once put it: “forgiveness liberates the soul. That is why it is such a powerful weapon.”



Please pray with me:

Lord Jesus, in this season of Advent give us the courage to forgive one another and ourselves, the grace to receive forgiveness when it is offered, and the courage to ask for forgiveness no matter how vulnerable it makes us feel. Amen.