

“Cultivating Courage”

2 Corinthians 4:1-18

New Revised Standard Version

“Therefore since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart,” (2 Corin. 4:1, NRSV).

“Since God has so generously let us in on what he is doing, we’re not about to throw up our hands and walk off the job just because we run into hard times,” (2 Corin. 4:1, The Message).

“Since we are joined together in this ministry as a result of the mercy shown to all of us by God, we do not become discouraged,” (2 Corin. 4:1, The Voice).

“God has been kind enough to trust us with this work. That is why we never give up,” (2 Corin. 4:1, Contemporary English Version).

“This is the ministry which God in his mercy has given us and nothing can daunt us,” (2 Corin. 4:1, J.B. Phillips New Testament).

One verse, five different translations. Five different ways of saying that we who are followers of Jesus, we who proclaim the power of Christ, we who believe in the hope and truth of the resurrection that Death does not get the last word...WE are the ones who are called to this faith that is both beyond us and within us...WE are the ones who are called to the WORK of Christianity, the MINISTRY of JESUS...WE are the ones to whom God has both given and entrusted this work and WE are the ones who have received grace and mercy and forgiveness (second chance upon second chance)...and because WE - YOU and ME - are the ones, and because THIS gospel ministry stuff is OUR work, we do not lose heart, we do not walk off the job, we do not get discouraged, we do not give up, we are not daunted by the task.

Paul is speaking to a tired people. Can you tell? This sounds like a rally call or a pep

talk for those who are tired. For those who have felt like walking off the job if they haven't done so already, for those who are suffering and hurting, for those who are ready to throw in the towel, for those who don't quite know what their purpose is in life or why any of this matters anyway.

You only say "therefore we do not lose heart" to people who you suspect might be losing heart. Which is all of us, at some point in our lives, right?

It is impossible to get through life without sometimes losing heart. It's not that we ever really lose our heart, though is it? It's just that we lose touch with that which gives us a pulse, a purpose.

The Corinthians are fighting within themselves. They are fighting among themselves. And they are fighting forces beyond themselves. Paul senses their fatigue. He knows that they are being oppressed by an empire that does not want them to proclaim or follow Jesus. Remember, before Paul was Paul, he was Saul - head persecutor and killer of Jesus followers, so he knows the

external threat to the community all too well. He knows that as they try to protect and insulate themselves from this external threat of being persecuted for their faith that now they have started fighting amongst themselves as a community - arguing about which leader they should follow and who has the best spiritual gift, and how they should hold each other accountable.

And Paul knows, perhaps all too well from his own days in prison and from his own suffering, that each of the Corinthians are dealing with their own internal struggles too. They are questioning their worth, their purpose, if they are good enough to bear the name of Christ, if they have anything to offer.

Now, many times in his letters to the Corinthians, Paul tells them what they're doing wrong and what they need to do to fix it. He points out - gently or not-so-gently - their faults and failings and how they can do better. But in chapter 4 - he's all about building up their morale. He shares with them the gift of encouragement.

Which on the one hand is so simple, but it can make all the difference in the world. I'm willing to bet that at some point in your life, someone encouraged you, and it led you down a new path.

Encouragement invites you to see yourself as God sees you; for all that you can do, not what you cannot do.

So Paul encourages the Corinthians by reminding them who they are and whose they are and what their purpose is, but not by telling them that they're great. But rather by reminding them that they are ordinary...and ordinary is enough. God can work with ordinary. In fact, ordinary is actually extraordinary when we stop expecting ourselves to be to god and just let God be God and let ourselves be the vessels in which God resides and through which God works. We are not always going to understand what God is doing within us or through us. That's part of the deal. That we won't always get it. But if we hang in there...we will come to see God's vision for us...in time.

We are clay jars, Paul writes. And our treasure is the power

of God within us, which is not to say we are nothing and God is everything. It is to say, we are everything because God is within us. There's no separation. Our belovedness and giftedness is not about being perfect or successful or impressing people, it is about Christ's love living in us and through us. It doesn't come from our parents or our children, from our profession or our education, so because it doesn't come from outside of us - none of us are missing it. We all have it. God's presence and gifts within us. Sometimes we just need help seeing that presence.

It reminds me of Kintsugi, the centuries old Japanese art of fixing broken pottery. When a bowl or dish breaks, you don't throw it away - you mend it. But as you're mending it, you don't hide the scar, you highlight it - you illuminate it. Rather than rejoining the shattered pieces of pottery with a camouflaged or invisible glue to try and make the pottery look new or like it had never been broken, the Kintsugi technique uses a special tree sap lacquer dusted with powdered gold. Once completed, beautiful

seams of gold gleam in the conspicuous cracks.¹



This artform emphasizes fractures and breaks instead of hiding or disguising them. In fact, Kintsugi often makes the repaired piece even more beautiful than the original, revitalizing it with a new look, giving it a second life. Because it's not just about embracing imperfections, it's about declaring that no pot, no jar, no vessel is worth discarding. Ever.

Yes, Paul says, we are ordinary clay jars, with cracks and faults, but we have the extraordinary power of Christ within us. And that is purpose enough to declare each and every one of us indispensable. And this power of Christ is always repairing us and healing us from our wounds and sufferings and not only putting us back together just to be able to function day-to-day, but giving us a strength and a hope beyond what we could know on our

¹ Kelly Richman-Abdou, "Kintsugi: The Centuries-Old Art of Repairing Broken Pottery with Gold," *My*

Modern Met (5 Sept. 2019), accessed on 19 June 2020 at <https://mymodernmet.com/kintsugi-kintsukuroi/>.

own. It's as if Paul is saying, like Kintsugi, we illuminate the love and power of God even more when our imperfections and sufferings show. When we don't try to pretend that we're perfect, but when we keep persevering and persisting.

And what we show forth to the world is a faith that's full of courage. Another way to say, "So do we do not lose heart," is to say, "So we have courage."

Social scientist Brené Brown writes, "Courage is a heart word. The root of the word courage is *cor* - the Latin word for heart. In one of its earliest forms, the word courage meant *"To speak one's mind by telling all one's heart."* Over time, this definition has changed, and today, we typically associate courage with heroic and brave deeds. But this definition fails to recognize the inner strength and level of commitment required for us to actually speak honestly and openly about who we are and about our experiences -- good and bad. Speaking from our hearts,

without worrying about being perfect, is courageous.²

This week in an interview Laverne Cox was asked, "*What's the very first thing you do when you're called to be brave or courageous?*" Cox, takes a deep breath and she answers, "*My prayer is....God give me permission to do this imperfectly and allow me to be of service.*"³

God give me permission to do this imperfectly. God give me permission to know I'm a mortal, a clay vessel, and that's okay. Your image still lives in me and shines through me. NOW is always the time to live our authentic lives and speak our truth; and to allow space for others to do the same. When we do this, no matter how crazy or chaotic the world seems, then the collective body of the church does not "lose heart"...for we are living from the power of Christ shining in and through us – rather than living through our own fears or limited perspectives or from our own bubbles of protection.

² From Brené Brown's book, *I Thought It Was Just Me: Women Reclaiming Power and Courage in a Culture of Shame*.

³ Brené Brown's podcast *Unlocking Us*, Episode: Brené with Laverne Cox on Transgender Representation, Advocacy, and the Power of Love (June 16, 2020).

The hope in this passage, the encouragement, is that there is more going on than we can ever see on our own; there is a bigger picture that God can see and that we are called to help create, even if we can't fully see the end product. It's like a puzzle. As we engage in the work, piece by piece the picture comes into view.

It takes courage to work toward the vision of God's kin-dom even when we don't fully know what it looks like or where we fit into it. We just have to trust that the puzzle pieces we put in, make a difference. That they make the image a bit clearer for the next person who comes along.

Jesus tried to paint the picture of God's kin-dom for the people of his day and it got him killed. So maybe this piece by piece method is how God calls us to work because as the vision grows, it gains clarity, and in turn, it grows followers. But we have to be doing our part.

But we can't do our part if we've lost heart. Paul reminds us of how Christ's power within us allows us to endure trials and tribulations while not being completely destroyed. He tells us again of the Good News that all that distorts and spoils our created goodness dies in Jesus on the cross -- whether we've created that dysfunction or others have imposed it on us. It may not have died in our world yet, but it has died in the kin-dom of God. And Jesus' life and ministry and resurrection show us what the flourishing of new creation in our lives looks like.⁴ But that flourishing and renewal entails sharing in suffering -- we follow a crucified Messiah. Suffering is part of our journey even as we continually work to put to death all that creates more suffering and injustice in our world.⁵

In fact, God's glory shines in and through our fragile human existence in the "face" of our crucified Messiah. This is how death becomes life. When we do not allow suffering or struggle to define us, but rather

⁴ Lois Malcolm, "Commentary on 2 Corinthians 4:5-12," *Working Preacher* (3 June 2018), accessed on June 19, 2020 at

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3669.

⁵ Malcolm, *ibid*.

to transform us.⁶ To resurrect us out of old ways and into new vision.

With conviction Paul writes,
“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies,” (2 Corin. 4: 8-10).

You perhaps have been afflicted, or in the Greek, you have been “stressed and hard pressed” from every side. But you are not crushed or broken. You may feel that way. But you are, in fact, still whole.

You may be feeling the compounding stress of coronavirus quarantine, parenting and caregiving without a break or help. You may be feeling the stress of unemployment or the lackluster feeling of not being able to collaborate with colleagues because you’re working from home. You may be feeling the lack of social interaction with

friends and the suffocation of too much interaction with family. You may be fatiguing of all the caution and precaution you must take just to go out in the world to run errands. And you are most likely feeling your own griefs and struggles and illnesses and hardships - which have been around for a while, and now they’re in your face in a whole new way. It can feel like a pressure cooker right now, indeed, perhaps in your own heart or house, and certainly in our country...but, Paul says, all of these stresses do not define you.

Your stresses and wounds and worries and even the shards of your shattered heart are being held together by the truth of your worthiness and belonging that that is so much bigger than you.

Or perhaps have been perplexed, confused, full of questions and doubts, hopeless about whether anything will ever change - and yes, maybe you have at times been driven to despair, in the depths of depression, but, Paul says, you

⁶ Malcolm, *ibid*.

do still have within you - in all your uncertainty - your life, and breath. You are here. Your mind may be exploding and your heart hurting, and it is also true that you are still here. And not understanding the world or faith or your place in it - is normal. You are not weird for feeling confused or upset. You are not unintelligent for having questions or concerns or doubts about the world or what you've been taught. Questions create curiosity. Curiosity is an act of courage.

You may be having a hard time connecting with friends and family, wondering how to find your own voice in all of this or how to quiet your own voice more to listen to the voices of others. Yes, you may be perplexed. But the questions, the curiosity, the staying in the arena of conversations that are awkward and hard and uncomfortable - that is what keeps us from despair. It's when we stop thinking or talking with others and retreat back to the vortex of our own dark thoughts or to what we have always told ourselves to

be true that the despair will come.

Or some of you may have been persecuted, or tortured, unfairly treated, bullied, or subject to unjust systems. But you have not been forsaken. You are not forgotten. To people of color God says, *"I hear you, I see you; your black and brown bodies are beloved. You may be forsaken by systems of oppression, but you are not forsaken by me. Your life matters."*

And sometimes, people step up and embody the truth that no one is forsaken by God in remarkable ways. We saw glimmers of such hope this week with two Supreme Court decisions, as the federal anti-bias law now covers millions of gay, lesbian and transgender workers who cannot be discriminated against in their place of employment.⁷ And - as protection from deportation was restored to hundreds of thousands of immigrants brought to the U.S. as children through the Deferred Action for

⁷ Joan Biskupic, "Two conservative justices joined decision expanding LGBTQ rights," *CNN* (16 June 2020), accessed on 19 June 2020 at

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/15/politics/supreme-court-expanding-gay-rights/index.html>.

Childhood Arrival (DACA) program.⁸

Even when we, as humans, forsake our fellow humans, we always have a chance to make a different choice tomorrow. This is God's grace and it takes courageous faith. To make the different choice tomorrow. When anyone of us suffers, we all suffer. We cannot forsake another, for in doing so, we forsake our very souls, our humanity.

And, Paul concludes, some of you may have been struck down, but you are not destroyed. Sadly, people are struck down. We say their names so that their spirits are not destroyed even as their lives are: Rayshard Brooks, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, Na'Kia Crawford, Riah Milton, Dominique Fells.

And it is because that lives are, in fact destroyed, that we who are still breathing, still alive, must not lose heart...even when we want to. Even though our outer nature is wasting

away - even though everything we see seems dystopian - our inner nature is being renewed day by day, God is still at work in us and the world every moment. We look not just at what is before us in plain sight but we look beyond that to see the kin-dom of God dancing in the distance, beckoning us to bring it forth here on earth...piece by piece...no matter how hard or perplexing the puzzle...each and every day. And THAT is why we do not lose heart. That is our calling.

I'm recording this sermon on Juneteenth. President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation legally abolished slavery on January 1, 1863. But it wasn't until June 19, 1865, that Union soldiers, led by Major General Gordon Granger, FINALLY landed in Galveston, Texas with the news that the war had ended and the enslaved were free. Why the two and a half year time laps? Well, there are all kinds of theories as to why but the truth is, though slavery was illegal, it was alive and well in the hearts and minds of

⁸ Ariane de Vogue, Devan Cole and Jamie Ehrlich, "Supreme Court blocks Trump from ending DACA," CNN (18 June 2020), accessed on June 19, 2020 at

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/18/politics/daca-immigration-supreme-court/index.html>.

many who still wanted economic gain at the expense of human life and livelihoods.⁹

But on this day the news finally made it to Texas. Sometimes it takes a long time for the good news to come. But it comes. Our job is just to make it come faster.

"Juneteenth" is a celebration and it's call to action for all of us that we must continue to rise alongside those who have been afflicted in every way, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down because we cannot lose heart as long as there are systems and patterns of life that continue to crush hearts and destroy lives.

Courageous faith is not a faith that exists only in the mind; it's a faith that has taken hold of the heart; it's the unshakeable conviction that God loves ALL PEOPLE and wants liberation for all people. Including you.

To cultivate courage is to work on your heart and tap into the power of Christ that is within you. Courage is not perfection.

It's showing up. It is "keeping on on keeping on" even when you're tired and worn down. It's remembering that God believes in you and has equipped you for this day. It means recognizing that you can't do this alone and you weren't created to do it alone. The *imago dei*, the divine image of God, is not a singular person, it is the web of creation, or, maybe even, a big collection of clay pots and jars.

What does it mean for you to cultivate courage in this moment in your life right now?

Pick one thing. Maybe it means just breathing through the next moment. Maybe it means picking one cause to educate yourself about and become an advocate for. Maybe it means sharing your story of faith with someone else. Maybe it means telling someone you are hurting and you need help. Maybe it means listening to someone else's story of pain and suffering without trying to make it your own or fix it. Maybe it means being brave enough to pray, to put words to

⁹ History of Juneteenth information accessed at <https://www.juneteenth.com/history.htm> on June 19, 2020.

what you are feeling and speak them aloud to God. Maybe it means picking up a book by someone who looks or thinks differently than you. Maybe it means admitting you don't know all the answers. Maybe it means forgiving someone. Or forgiving yourself. Maybe it means saying "enough is enough" and working for change. Maybe you don't know what it means today, but it means you'll wake up again tomorrow trying to figure it out.

Each of our journeys of faith looks different...but in all our journeys, faith never looks complacent because it's always calling us to be courageous.

19th century clergyman Phillips Brooks said, "*Do not pray for an easy [life]. Pray [for more courage.] Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks.*"

Author, Patricia Campbell Carlson says the same thing a different way: "*We don't know what life will bring, so it is what we bring to life that matters.*"

If this is true, then don't you want to bring a courageous

faith to our wild and unpredictable world?

Don't "lose heart;" "take heart," - for it is through your life - through YOUR ordinary, shattered and glued back together clay jar life - that the kin-dom of God will be seen and experienced here on earth.

Amen.