

## “Profiles in Courage”

06/25/17, 10AM

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After experiencing special and diverse readings for the last three Sundays – Pentecost, Blessed Trinity, Corpus Christi -- this Sunday the church returns to the continuous reading of Matthew’s Gospel. We will be following Matthew from now until the beginning of Advent in December. Today we are in the midst of chapter 10, called the “Mission Discourse” in which Jesus sends his disciples to preach with the same courage he has shown in spite of rejection and hostility.

“Fear no one.” Speak boldly. “You are worth more than many sparrows (Matthew 10: 26-33).” I have entitled my reflection ‘Profiles in Courage,’ drawing from four examples of courageous boldness, one from today’s Scriptural account of Jeremiah and three from our own time. Jeremiah heard what he called “whisperings” as enemies conspired against him. Jeremiah was fearless. The Lord “is with me, like a mighty champion: my persecutors will stumble, they will not triumph (Jeremiah 20: 10-13.”

Perhaps you may recall President Kennedy’s little memoir presenting vignettes of eight unsung inspiring patriotic figures from the American past, heroes who fearlessly spoke out uncomfortable truth in spite of surefire rejection. We would hope to have that kind of courage manifested by our own political leaders. Kennedy won a Pulitzer prize in 1955 for this tribute to heroes of the past. He was Senator Kennedy then, before being elected president.

A hero in our time was a leader who modeled his speech upon today’s gospel passage about fearing no one. You have heard excerpts of that address before, as I have, but it was only this week that I came to realize how closely it follows Jesus’ words to his disciples. On April 3, 1968, Martin Luther King concluded his speech in Memphis, Tennessee, with these words:

“I got into Memphis, and some began to say the threats, or talk about the threats that were out, or what would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers. Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But, it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountain top. And I don’t mind.”

“Like anyone else, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place, but I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over, and I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But, I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land! And so, I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man!”

“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

This call to courage, one writer said, rolled off the tongue of the “Drum Major for Justice” (a biography of King) with cadence and power unequalled in any church. His congregation heard the splendid sound, like the ringing of a bell on a frosty morning. He spoke bravely with the perfect pitch of heartfelt truth.

Dr. King finished his memorable speech to the striking sanitation workers and their supporters in Mason Temple. Less than twenty hours later, he was dead – murdered in Memphis.

My second example of a profile in courage is that of Kyle Maynard, a motivational speaker today. Kyle was born with what is called congenital amputation – without hands or feet. He has lived as a quadriplegic all his life. Kyle wrote a memoir of his life experience in a best-selling popular book called “No Excuses.” [2006] He was blessed with an unrelenting determination to courageously keep trying, regardless of his failures and disappointments and the sufferings he had to bear to achieve his goals. He is honored today as the nation’s top disabled athlete. Six years after publishing “No Excuses,” Kyle set out with nine others to climb a mountain. Like Martin Luther King, he went to a mountain. Not just any mountain, Mount Kilimanjaro. In spite of having to crawl all the way, he made it!

Martin Luther King was greeted with thunderous applause when he finished his speech in Memphis. An admirer remembers Kyle Maynard’s speech to seventh and eighth grade students at Sacred Heart Church in Camden, New Jersey. He entered the church in a wheelchair, climbed out of it, and crawled his way to the front, where he climbed up on a chair and spoke for forty-five minutes. Courage personified! His admirer describes the sermon as an experience that forever changed him.

Today’s gospel challenged Jesus’ disciples to fear nothing. That gospel is addressed to us today. We have described three profiles in courage, that of Jeremiah, Martin Luther King, and Kyle Maynard. Are you willing to join their company?

As a post script consider one more profile in courage, the great and beloved Irish poet Seamus Heaney, a favorite of mine ever since I was in Ireland on the day he died on August 30, 2013. Seamus proclaimed a final text message to his dear wife in the last minutes of his life, offering the simple encouragement “Nolle Timere.” Don’t be afraid. The Heaney’s had experienced years of anxiety during the Time of Troubles in Ireland, between Catholics and Protestants, from the 1960’s to the Peace Truce of 1998. Heaney’s conviction was that of Jesus himself in today’s gospel. “Fear no one!”