

“Courage In the Struggle”

2 Timothy 1:1-14

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Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore

San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ

There is a legend about a traveller making his way from the Orient to a distant city. Along the way he meets two other travelers whose names are Fear and Plague. Plague explains to the traveller that, once they arrived, they expect to kill 10,000 people in the city. The traveller asks Plague if Plague would do all the killing. “On no,” Plague replies. I shall kill only a few hundred. My friend Fear will kill all the rest.”

Fear is a driving force in our world today. It is easy for fear to become the lens through which we view our world and make sense of it. People like to remind us about all we have to be afraid of; they say we must protect ourselves in every way possible because the world is a scary place where very bad things happen. There’s some truth in that statement. The theme of many of our movies is that danger and terror are just barely kept at bay. If we have superhuman skills perhaps we will escape an inevitable fate. But to do so, we must become like gods, like Superman or another hero figure.

This world view driven by fear often causes people to withdraw and create barriers so that the harshness of the world can be kept at a distance. Sometimes this lens of viewing the world through fear can creep unnoticed into relationships where trust is replaced by keeping others at a distance. Fear can make us paranoid in our work because we focus on the possibility of being laid off, of making mistakes, of being “done in” by a coworker who’s mad at us. This fear can even make us up-tight parents always fearing for the safety or success of our children. Yes, our traveling companion, *fear*, can easily consume us.

But there’s another lens through which we can view the world. It is the Biblical understanding that the world *was* and still *is* created by a loving Creator who created and then said “it is good”. And even though creation is fallen, even though the world IS sometimes a scary place where bad things happen, what is fallen can be redeemed, and God can lift us up on the wings of eagles.

This world view says to us that as the world gets harder, we must join hands and hold on tight to each other. And not only do we hold hands with those near and dear to us, those we lovingly acknowledge as we sing the closing benediction (though holding one another’s hands in this community of faith IS very important), but we have a long reach, a reach way out into the world that has far-reaching effects, a reach that grabs the hands of our *neighbors in need*.

We are people of faith who in our heart of hearts claim to this second view of the world. We believe the world was created in love, by love, and through love. Our faith claims that long ago in the midst of chaos the Spirit hovered over the waters and brought order. We believe that many years later, Jesus, the manifestation of God’s Spirit, said again to the waters of chaos, “Peace, be still.”

The world into which Jesus was born was about as scary a place that ever could be. Life was cheap; it could be destroyed without much thought. There was every reason in the world to think that Jesus, God’s anointed, would come in power and might and exert military control. With one fell swoop he could straighten out the mess the world was in. But Jesus didn’t do that. Jesus said, “when the world gets harder, join hands with God, join hands with each other, and be courageous in the struggle. Because God knows that might does not always make right.”

The hard part of claiming the second world view is that it requires patience to allow for an unseen future. We may live as though we are the center of the universe; we're hard-wired towards this tendency. In fact, in one of the conferences I attended last week, the one on "Congregational Vitality," the teacher said to us at the very beginning that the most important thing we could get out of the day's reflection was that today, many people see the world as "all about me." Then he said the *second* most important thing we should remember is that people today think "it's all about me." And if we don't get one and two, then the third thing we should take home is that people today see the world as "all about me."

But as people of faith, we believe that it *isn't* all about us. Our lives, our stories are *not* the only stories to tell. In fact, ours are not the most important story, as my seminary teacher liked to remind us. He even wrote a book titled, *God Has a Story, Too!* because he was tired of the over emphasizes placed on individuals' stories while neglecting to acknowledge that God has a story. We are important to God's story, but God's story goes on long after we're gone. A long term view of the world gives God's story a chance to play itself out; it gives redemption a chance.

Perhaps it was this humility of knowing that God's story didn't end with him, that gave Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian and anti-Nazi, courage in the struggle to write this prayer on the morning of his execution.

*O God, early in the morning I cry to you.  
Help me to pray and to concentrate my thoughts on you:  
I cannot do this alone. In me there is darkness,  
But with you there is light; I am lonely, but you do not leave me;  
I am feeble in heart, but with you there is help; I am restless, but with you there is peace.  
In me there is bitterness, but with you there is patience;  
I do not understand your ways, But you know the way of me. . .  
Restore me to liberty, And enable me so to live now  
That I may answer before you and before my Lord.  
Whatever this day may bring, Your name be praised.*

Perhaps this humility was the wisdom of those who wrote our own United Church of Christ Statement of Faith including these words:

*You promise to all who trust you  
forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,  
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,  
your presence in trial and rejoicing,  
and eternal life in your realm which has no end.*

Notice the importance of *trust in God*, not a trust that scary things will never happen. Rather, trust in God's presence both in trial and rejoicing. And God's presence is both Spirit and the very concrete, tangible hand God gives you to hold of one beside you--the hand of your neighbor.

On this World Communion Sunday we have the sacrament of hands touching hands in distant places. We share our resources through the Neighbors In Need Offering and thus touch hands. Today throughout the world people share this communion knowing that this ritual of remembrance is taking place and that prayers are being spoken for our brothers and sisters, seen and unseen, near and far.

When we say we take into our bodies, the body of Christ through bread that gives life, we are joining ourselves to a world God embraced through Jesus Christ. When we share the cup of blessing, we are receiving God's blessing and promising to extend the blessing outward to all the world. Especially today when we share this communion may we really notice in our bodies and souls, what it is we are doing, and the promises we make to God, to one another, and to our neighbors in need.

Two world views -- fear or faith. God says, "Choose this day whom you shall serve."  
May we choose faith!