

## Stories of Courage: Prayer Sunday, 6/4/17

**1** The following story of courage reminds us that courageous acts happen every day in the ordinary struggles of life- in this case, in the life of an exhausted caregiver ([epsitles.us/prayerstories](http://epsitles.us/prayerstories)):

*My companion of more than a decade had contacted AIDS...[AND] near the end he was homebound and in bed...[T]his was a heavy time for me, not only because of Jim's illness, but because I still had to go to Columbia University every day and then come home at night and take care of him - plus I was often up and down and up and down during the night, helping him. Then at 6:30 the next morning, the whole regime would start all over again. Part of my exhaustion was from sleep-deprivation, but what could I do? Then one evening coming home from work, I felt like I was at the end. I prayed, "Oh Lord, I'm finished. I'm so tired. I just can't go on. What am I going to do? Help me!" At that moment I was filled with [what] I can only describe was a flow of heavenly power, a miraculous energy surged through my whole body! I ran home, completely astonished by it all. From that time to the day he died, I never felt that exhaustion again, but had the strength I need to do whatever needed to be done.*

Does God answer prayers, church? Come, Holy Spirit, come!

**2** We conclude our series on Courage this morning with Courageous Prayer. None of the other kinds of courage we've looked at in this series (risk, vulnerability, trust, and perseverance) are possible to fully receive and express without learning how to pray courageously. That's exactly why, exactly one year ago, on Pentecost Sunday, 2016, we introduced Breakthrough Prayer to you as the foundational work of the Holy Spirit in leading us into a new season of fruitfulness through the MCCI. And what a ride it's been, as we've experienced bold prayer in new ways. It was fitting that we began our breakthrough prayer initiative on Pentecost, and today it's fitting that we hear stories of courageous prayer on Pentecost. Although the Bible is full of God's people praying boldly, there's something about the prayers recorded in the book of Acts that are electrifying, burning with the heat and passion of the Holy Spirit. We heard the bold story of the day of Pentecost in our first reading, with the Holy Spirit descending on the Apostles like tongues of fire. In this next story of courageous prayer, we witness how the Holy Spirit emboldens the disciples to pray

and then propels them into powerful ministry. I'm reading again from the book of Acts, chapter 4, starting with verse 23.

**{Read Acts 4:23-31, NLT}.**

**3** Fresh from being arrested by the Sadducees, notice how the disciples prayed. First they acknowledged God and God's sovereignty over all creation. Next they appealed to Holy Scripture, finding a connection between the Scripture and their current life situation. Only then did they ask God to act. That's not a bad way to pray, and it implies that all of us, including myself, need to grow in our familiarity with God's Holy Word if we want to learn to pray more courageously.

Notice next what the disciples of Jesus did not pray. They didn't pray that God would protect them, that God would smite the Sadducees, or that God would in some other way make this situation more comfortable or easy for them. Instead, they prayed this: "[G]ive your servants great boldness in their preaching. Send your healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus." They asked for boldness in preaching! Can you believe it? Is that what you would have asked God for? And then, they had the audacity to ask God to work miracles in the name of Jesus! When was the last time you asked God to perform a miracle in the name of Jesus?

I wonder if we've forgotten how to pray boldly, especially in Minnesota, where, as Garrison Keillor was fond of pointing out, none of us seem to want to appear to be rising above our respective stations of humility! But courageous prayer doesn't presume anything about ourselves other than our faith that God will listen to us. Courageous prayer is all about God's sovereignty, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the alignment of our hearts with God's mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation and healing of the world.

**4** Listening to these impassioned prayers from Acts might give you the wrong idea that courageous prayer requires a great deal of shouting and an endless Biblical vocabulary. Sometimes the most courageous thing we can do in prayer is to sit in stillness and silence. One story teller [[inspirationalstories.com](http://inspirationalstories.com)] relates the following about Mother Theresa:

*Mother Teresa was asked once by an interviewer, "When you pray, what do you say to God?" She said, "I don't talk, I listen." The interviewer then asked, "What does God say to you?" Mother Teresa replied, "He doesn't talk. He listens. And if you don't understand that, I*

can't explain it to you." [The commentator goes on to say,] *There is a place of union, of communion, that goes beyond human language. In your spiritual practice, in prayer, open yourself to experience this holy moment.*

I recently picked up a book called The Twelve Degrees of Silence. It's a mystical work from the 19<sup>th</sup> century that goes beyond the silence of words and explores disciplines such as silence in actions, silence in one's imagination, and silence in judgment. I'm not going to kid you, this is deep and challenging inner work and I really haven't even begun to embark on any of these degrees of silence. But it's good to remember that courageous prayer often wells out of a disciplined inner life that is practiced in the surrender to the Holy Spirit.

**5** The Biblical title, Acts, is a shorthand taken from a title given it in the second century, "The Acts of the Apostles." I always preferred to refer to this book as "The Acts of the Holy Spirit," because it was the power of the Holy Spirit that literally shook the ground and turned the known world upside down with the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, it's instructive to note that the courageous prayer of the disciples was followed by courageous action. The Bible tells us that "After this prayer, the building where they were meeting shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. And they preached God's message with boldness." Did you notice that God answered their prayer immediately and directly? When we pray courageously for God to lead us into bold action, and that action fits the plan for how God is working in the world to accomplish the divine mission, that's a prayer that God loves to answer!

Thomas Monson shares this true story of action in his book, Aspiring to Greatness:

*A mammoth 747 jetliner, while flying over the Pacific, sustained a gigantic tear on its side, ejecting nine passengers to their deaths, and threatening the lives of all. When the pilot, Captain David Cronin, was interviewed, having brought the craft back safely to Honolulu, he was asked, "What did you do when the plane ripped open? How did you cope?" Captain Cronin replied, "I prayed, then went to work."*

Courageous prayer doesn't end with prayer. We pray, and then we go to work, joining God's Holy Spirit in the joyful work of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation and healing of the world.

**6** In the accounts just before this one in Acts 4, Luke makes a point in his writing of

underscoring the ordinary stature of Peter and John, who are described as “uneducated and ordinary men.” In fact, we know from the Gospels that Peter and John were fisherman, hardly scholars or trained orators. Sometimes we’re fooled into believing that courageous prayer has to be led by eloquent people, or trained spiritual leaders such as pastors. Nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus reserved his harshest judgments for people like me-teachers of the law who often think they know better than everybody else. I don’t!

Consider this story of courageous prayer from Sharon Glasgow ([sharonglasgow.com](http://sharonglasgow.com)) concerning the mother of our spiritual forbearers, John and Charles Wesley :

*Susanna Wesley was married to a preacher. They had 10 children of [whom], two grew up to bring millions of souls to Christ. .. It’s a powerful story if you stop there, isn’t it? But, behind the door of her home, hopeless conditions were the norm. She married a man who couldn’t manage money. They disagreed on everything from money to politics. They had 19 children. All except ten died in infancy. Sam (her husband) left her to raise the children alone for long periods of time. One of their children was crippled. Another couldn’t talk until he was nearly six years old. Susanna herself was desperately sick most of her life. There was no money for food or anything. Debt plagued them. Sam was once thrown into debtor’s prison because their debt was so high, which doubled their problems. Twice the homes they lived in were burned to the ground, losing everything they owned.*

*When Susanna was young, she promised the Lord that for every hour she spent in entertainment, she would give to Him [an hour] in prayer and in the Word. Taking care of the house and raising so many kids made this commitment nearly impossible to fulfill... So, she decided to instead give the Lord two hours a day in prayer! She struggled to find a secret place to get away with Him. So she advised her children that when they saw her with her apron over her head, that meant she was in prayer and couldn’t be disturbed. She was devoted to her walk with Christ, praying for her children and knowledge in the Word no matter how hard life was. We can be the best mom, wife, friend, person in the world and still have untold hardships. We need to take Susanna’s example, flip our apron over our head and pray in the middle of it all.*

**7** Courageous prayer, whether it’s from the pages of the Bible or taking place in the kitchen of your home, is prayer that acknowledges the sovereign power of God, is informed

by the Holy Scriptures, is formed by an inner silence and surrender to God's Holy Spirit, and is aligned in Spirit and in action with God's mission for the Church of making disciples of Jesus for the transformation and healing of the world. Courageous prayer is offered every day by everyday people- people like you and like me. As Tara Beth Leach notes ([leadher.org/bold-prayer](http://leadher.org/bold-prayer)):

*[W]hen we read through the pages of the New Testament we see a wild, untamed Triune God that heals, transforms, forgives sins, and does the unfathomable. We wonder – does God still work like this? God does. God is. God will...*

*It was Abraham who prayed for God to spare Sodom. It was Moses who prayed that God would forgive all of Israel. It was Joshua who prayed for the sun to stand still...It was Samson who prayed for victory against all odds. It was Hannah who prayed for a son...It was Elijah who prayed for fire from heaven. It was Elisha who prayed for his servant's eyes to be open. It was Hezekiah who prayed for a longer life...It was Habakkuk who prayed for revival for an entire nation. It was Jesus who healed countless [people]...It was the disciples who prayed for boldness and power in Acts...*

*Bold prayers are audacious; they are scary; they are intimidating, and they are all too often pegged as “weird”, so we avoid them. But there is one thing all of these bold prayers have in common: Over and over again bold prayers are linked to the missional imagination of our Triune God.*

Please pray with me.

*God of compassion and fire, fill us with boldness in prayer and in action that we might join you in bringing good news to the poor, freedom to the captives, sight to the blind, and deliverance to the oppressed. Amen.*



# *Buffalo United Methodist Church*



*...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!*

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