

COURAGEOUS LIVING – FCCH – April 7, 2024

Last Sunday, in her Easter sermon titled “Don’t Hold On,” Karla Miller reminded us that many of us get stuck in our lives, holding on to the way we’ve always done things, and holding on to ways of living that do not lead us nowhere positive. Karla quoted Parker Palmer, who said “I now see that “hanging on” can be a fearful, needy, and clinging way to be in the world.” “For some of us who have experienced trauma or difficulty in any form,” Karla said, “holding on to control has been the way in which we have navigated danger and fear. Loosening our grip, however, can lead to transformation.”

It was a powerful sermon, and I, like many of you, I suspect, resonated with the need to let go of some things in my life. But as I listened to the sermon last Sunday, I couldn’t help but think “Yes, you’re right. But letting go is going to take some courage on my part.”

The word courage comes from the Latin “cor,” which means “heart.” The original use of the word courage meant to stand by one’s core. In other words, to live from our center, from a place in which we are listening to our heart and to the spirit of God. It says that our lives will be defined by our core values, and not be ruled by fear, or people-pleasing or trying to fit in. When I look back on my own life, I see that the few times that I’ve acted with courage were times in which I stood by my core and listened to my heart.

The poet Maya Angelou knows a lot about courage. In addition to being a poet, she was a dancer, author, teacher, and civil-rights activist. She also faced numerous physical, mental, and emotional challenges in her life—some of which left her wracked with pain and required intense courage for her to face.

Maya Angelou said that we are not born with courage, but that we develop it, like a muscle, in the same way that we can eventually lift a 100 pound bag of rice by starting out with a five pound bag and then on to a ten pound bag, and twenty pounds and so forth until we can finally lift the 100 pound bag. Without developing our courage muscle, Maya Angelou said, we cannot practice any other positive virtue consistently.

I know that in this room today there are amazing stories of courage that many of you have lived in your lives—stories of overcoming personal demons, stories of serving in the armed forces, stories of overcoming tragic personal experiences, stories of bravery of every kind.

But I also suspect that many of us still struggle, at some level, with having the courage to do what we know in our hearts we need to do. Fear, unfortunately, never stops showing up in our lives.

Pastor Andy Stanley suggests that there are three primary faces of courage when we are fearful. The first is the courage to *stay when it would be easier to go*. Some of us are in tough environments right now. It might be a difficult job, or a difficult relationship, or a difficult situation. A big part of us says “I can’t do this,” but deep within us, if we slow down and give ourselves space, we can hear our heart telling us “Stay. This is difficult. But it’s where you need to be.”

The second face of courage, he says, is the courage to *leave, when it would be easy to stay*. Sometimes we have to walk away from a situation or a person, and it takes courage to do that. Sometimes we are in an abusive relationship, and it might seem easier to stay, but we need to leave. Sometimes we need to leave a job and open ourselves to the next right thing. Even if we might disappoint someone, sometimes leaving might be the courageous thing to do.

The third face of courage, says Rev. Stanley, is the courage *to ask for help, when it would be easier to pretend like everything's okay*. Secrets can be dangerous to our inner lives, and sometimes we need to take the bull by the horn and ask for help. Some of us might be dealing with alcohol or drug addiction, and we need to find the courage to seek help. Some of us are living with depression, and we need to seek the help of a therapist or doctor. And some of us believe that we can forego asking for help if we just keep trying harder, even though we are physically and emotionally drained. Sometimes it takes courage to ask for help, rather than to pretend that everything is ok.

The bottom line to this courage issue might be the word vulnerability, which is the act of being honest with ourselves and with others. Owning our own stories is the most courageous thing many of us will ever do, and I see that kind of courage happening all around me. I see it in those both young and old in this room who have found the courage to live their truth authentically. I see it in the immigrants who live in fear and yet are here, bravely doing their best to support their families. I see it in people who are struggling with addictions who show up to twelve step meetings. I see it in those who are dealing with illness, grief, caregiving and the challenges of aging who are courageously putting one foot in front of another each day. Sometimes it comes down to the truth of the quote that says "Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the little voice at the end of the day that says I'll try again tomorrow."

That being said, I also wonder, however, if this might be a time in which some of us need to find the courage to rest. Sometimes taking a break, acknowledging that a task might not be dependent on us at this moment, takes courage.

This call for courage is also a call to support others in their journey to courageous living. In fact, the word *encourage* means to impart strength and confidence; in other words, to do all we can to help others to live from *their* core values and from their heart.

Who can you and I encourage this week? Who needs to be reminded that they are cared for and that they matter? Through our words, we can remind others that they too can do what they weren't sure that they could do, and that they too can exercise their courage muscle.

Aidan Goldstein, whose picture is on the front of our bulletin, has spent his entire life exercising his courage muscle. This past month Aidan, who is a senior at the WISH Academy High School in Los Angeles, received the Naismith Courage Award. Named for James Naismith, the man credited with inventing the game of basketball, the Naismith Courage Award is given to a high school player who has consistently demonstrated courage in their approach to their life, their basketball team, their school, and their community.

The Atlanta Tipoff Club, which oversees the Naismith Awards, said that Aidan's courage and work ethic not only raised his own game, but also inspired his peers, and promoted inclusivity and diversity within his team. Aidan's journey, they said, reflects his "unparalleled determination to overcome physical challenges and his powerful impact both on the court and off the court."

Aidan, as you can see from the picture, was born without a left hand. His parents knew about this condition before Aidan was born, and they, of course, worried about the possibility of Aidan being bullied, and they worried that Aidan might not be able to find his place of happiness in the world. Aidan, however, has thrived-- both academically and athletically, particularly through basketball.

In the early days, he says, opposing teams would not guard him because they assumed he couldn't shoot a basketball. Now, he says, they know that he is a force on the basketball court, and he is always guarded. I watched several videos about Aidan this week, and I was moved by the words of his mother and father, because they never referred to Aidan's lack of a left hand as a *disability*, but rather as *his difference*. Maybe difference is a better word than disability as you and I think about our own challenges. We included a video about Aidan in this morning's email, and it's also on our website, and I encourage you to watch it.

Aidan has lived a life of courage. He has not allowed his difference to define him or to hold him back. In fact, he says, "I don't even think about it much anymore, except when I sense other people assuming things about me. Then I thrive on proving them wrong."

Friends, I know that there are some places in my life in which I want to live with greater courage. What about you? Have you, like me, been putting off a difficult conversation, or putting off asking for help, or putting off dealing with a health or mental health or addiction issue? Or perhaps you've felt in your heart a calling to stand up for those who face injustice but haven't taken any concrete action because of fear of a new situation. Or perhaps you need to forgive someone, or perhaps you need the courage to rest so that your bucket can be filled once again. Or perhaps it's something as simple as having the courage to speak to a stranger at coffee hour.

Whatever it may be, a good question for each of us in this moment is: What is the one thing that you and I need to do that will cause us to exercise our courage muscles?

When we answer that question and decide to do something that requires courage, may we remember that we are not alone. The Bible

says “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Spirit of the Lord is with us.” And the anthem based on Psalm 139 that the choir sang reminds us “If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea—even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.”

Perhaps the poet John O’Donohue best sums up our call to courage when he writes: “May I have the courage today to live the life that I would love, to postpone my dream no longer; but to do at last what I came here for and waste my heart on fear no more.”

May it be so for you, for me, and for all of God’s creation. Amen.