



The Unitarian Church in Westport

## SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

### *Ordinary Courage*

By Rev. Dr. John T. Morehouse, Senior Minister

Sunday, October 23, 2022

He was crouched in the doorway of the business next to my shop. His hands were over his head. It was a small town not a big city but I was surprised to see him there and no one stopping. I went in my store and closed the door. I didn't open for over an hour. At first I just stared out the window at the man. Should I call the police? What could they do? I realized I was shaking. I realized that I was faced with a moral dilemma. Ignore the problem or help. I was all of 26, what did I know?

My colleague Gregory Palley says, "There is a story in the Christian scriptures that is most often placed in to the category of miracle stories. This story is referred to as the Healing of the Bent-Over Woman, and is found in Gospel Luke, Chapter 13, verses 10-17:

10 Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. 11 And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. 12 When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." 13 When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

In the verses that follow, Jesus and the leader of the synagogue get into an argument about whether or not he should be healing anyone on the Sabbath, much less this bent over woman. Jesus, of course, wins the argument, puts his critic to shame, and the crowd rejoices at all the wonderful things he was doing."

How many of us have seen someone in the crowd or in our crowded lives who is bent over? How many of us feel bent over by this world in which we live? How do we even make it to the next day?

The first thing I realized about courage that day in front of the store was that I thought I didn't have any. Right? We have all thought I should have done something else. In fact, the number one regret of people at the end of their lives is "I wish I have the courage to do something else".

Do you hear me? Not the size of our portfolio (if we even have a portfolio) or the list of accomplishments, no the courage to have done something else.

Courage is not always heroic. Jesus, picked this woman out of the crowd, and despite it being on the sabbath, had the courage to call her out. Maybe that is where we should start as well.

Can we find the courage to call out the pain in our lives? Not telling someone else what they should have done, but starting with yourself, the pain in your life. Why was I so afraid to encounter this man? Because of my own insecurities first. Right? "We don't see the world as it is. We see the world as we are" said Anais Zin. So here I was fighting my own fright.

Let's start there. I think we spend entirely too much time blaming ourselves for who we are. It's the dark side of this culture of perfection and individualism. I want to tell you now: You are enough. As you are. Enough. As Mary Ann Radmacher said, "Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying 'I will try again tomorrow'."

And when there have been enough tomorrows. When we are called to act, then, we will act. Once I stopped shaking about the man in the doorway, I pondered my actions. In the biblical story Jesus did three things as Gregory Palley says:

"First: Jesus saw her, he picked her out of the crowd, he saw her when no one else would dare to. We, too, must see the oppressed. We cannot do anything if we, out of ignorance, or willfulness, or fear refuse to even see the suffering around us.

Second: Jesus calls out to her. He calls out to her and in so doing, the woman can no longer be ignored by her community. She is now not only seen by Jesus, but by everyone else as well. So, too, we must make the invisible in our society, visible. To do this is to take a risk. It is to take a risk of being in relationship with someone against the status quo. It is far easier to ignore those who are suffering. Being in relationship with someone who the rest of your community has turned away from is risky - we risk being shunned ourselves.

It also is a risk because when we call out to those who are suffering, we must implicitly confess our participation in the oppression. This is gut-wrenching stuff, identity-shaking stuff. We are good people, and we don't want to be reminded that often the everyday lives we lead - in the systems that we have learned and grown comfortable with - might be causing suffering in another person. And when we call out the suffering, we risk the possibility that we might have to upend the comfort, security, and certainty of our lives.

Third: Jesus lays his hands on her. Jesus lay his hands upon the woman to show us that it is not enough to simply see oppression, and do nothing. Nor is it enough to point out the oppressed or the oppression to others, and do nothing. Jesus' laying of hands is symbolic of the continued

compassion and work we must engage in if we are to ultimately heal the illness of injustice. We must work with those who suffer, bent under low social status, broken from poverty, addiction, or racism.” (ibid Palley)

But I wasn't thinking about any of this when I was 26. What was I going to do about the man in the doorway? What would you do? In fact, let me hear from you, what would you do?

Good. All so good. But of course that is not what I did. At first.

I walked outside and looked at him. He was filthy. He smelled. I went back inside. This is the way of ordinary courage my friends. We have to make a few attempts to get there. Right? Anyone who has battled addiction knows this.

I had my own demons to deal with. Firmly in the midst of what I call the quarter age crisis of our mid-20s, I was losing my fight with drugs, losing my marriage, probably losing my business. I think I saw far too much of myself in this man, who it seemed was my age.

The demons we face are always in the mirror. Scrooge sees his own grave before he pivots from anger to compassion. So do we. Perhaps so did Jesus. Last week I went to a retreat at a Catholic Retreat Center in Litchfield. They have a beautiful labyrinth which I walked. While doing a walking meditation, I came upon a little statue of the crucified Jesus in white marble on a small stone wall with a roof overhead. I stared at the statue for a long time. Why would god send us a broken man as our savior I thought? Indeed, so precious was this symbol for the Sister of this center that they put a roof over the broken man. Not to change his brokenness but to preserve it. I have always wondered about that.

Until I realized that brokenness is the human condition. We are all broken. Jesus just reminds us as he does in the story of the broken woman, that it is our own brokenness that gives us the courage to face other's brokenness.

As my colleague Sam Teitel put it “Our broken parts are what makes us compassionate and powerful. Do not be afraid of your brokenness, give thanks for it.”

Was this what I was supposed to do with the man in the doorway. See my own brokenness? Perhaps.

This Poem from Diedre Fagan sums it up:

On Monday you make pancakes, pay the bills, clean the floor, wipe down the counters, and begin chopping vegetables for soup. As the knife slices the onion thin, you peel away its outer layer and consider committing seppuku at noon.

On Tuesday you start the Crock-Pot, dust the blinds, rake the leaves, strip the beds, and carry the laundry downstairs. You put the wash on delicate, cold, and as you turn to go upstairs to the hum of the washer balancing its own mind, you longingly consider freshly washed, warmed, and crisp sheets tied gracefully around a rafter and your neck. Those beams appear strong.

Wednesday after tucking the kids into bed and starting the dishwasher, you wash your face, brush and floss your teeth, and line every pill bottle in the medicine cabinet up on the bathroom counter before considering what they will find in the morning. Then you carefully place the bottles back in the cupboard, turn out the lights, and climb into bed yourself, after checking the breaths of your children.

Thursday night you have a little bit too much to drink. Some wine. Several beers. Rum in a hot cup of tea. Then you remember something Nietzsche said about thoughts of suicide getting many through a dark night. This week you've made it three and a half days but it isn't the weekend yet. You aren't sure if N is right, but you know you can't drink the antifreeze.

Friday you go out for groceries and consider high speed, a curve, a tree, or maybe that bridge over there. But you probably wouldn't even be successful and then what a mess you'd make. No one would be there to clean it up. And the kids. Who would make them breakfast?

Saturday, you roll over to turn off the alarm but there isn't one. A blessing. Shortly thereafter there are kids on top of you, climbing over you, giggling, offering to get you coffee, begging for eggs and bacon, and so you make your way to the kitchen.

When the grease in the bacon pan begins to sizzle, you don't imagine dousing yourself in it or starting a grease fire. Instead you serve up breakfast and sip your coffee admiring the life you have created, the one still in the making.

(<https://wordsoftheyear.com/2015/07/15/most-of-the-days-of-the-week-by-deirdre-fagan/>)

I finally moved from fear to a broken courage. I went outside and leaned over the man. "Are you all right?" I asked. Have you ever stopped to think about the silliness of that question? Someone has been hit by car and we are asking "are you all right?" Of course they aren't all right. But I heard nothing. Maybe he was dead. Maybe asleep. My heart was racing. What was I going to do? I took a few deep breaths.

Nothing works like a few deep breaths my friends. I was doing yoga at this same retreat. And I came up from some crazy stance, like "downward facing dog, saluting the sunrise with my right

hand” and I was suddenly very dizzy. I started to wobble. The teacher saw me, ran over to hold my back and said “breath, deeply. It will go away.” I took a few deep breaths and I was fine.

That is ordinary courage. In the face of danger or own insecurities we breathe into it. Right. Let’s try this now.

I knew I had to go farther with the man in the doorway. So I lightly touched his shoulder. He moved. Good I thought not dead yet. “Hello” I said and touched his back. He sprang awake and looked right at me. He was crying. He had been crying. He was no older than me. “How can I help?” I asked.

That my beloveds, is a great question to ask. Even if you have never met the person. Asking How can I help? Puts the power back into them. Sometimes those in pain don’t know how you can help. Then all you can do is stay present, bear witness to their pain. Sometimes it’s more obvious as in the story of Jesus. But then he was Jesus and I was not.

He stared at me for a long while. “I lost my wife,” he said. I realized I was no longer standing over him but sitting beside him. “Tell me about her” I said. When in doubt ask more questions. He told me about how she had died of cancer. Of how he lost his job. Then starting cocaine, then heroine. He was as broken a soul as I have ever met.

I don’t really remember what I did next. I did not call the police. Try not to call the police. That default reinforces the racist system we live in when power over is seen as an antidote to what most people need which is power under. I think I called my friend Bob who worked at the radio station. Bob was in recovery. He came right over. We sat on either side with him. We were eventually able to get him to a social worker from the county. If I have any trouble with the story of Jesus and the bent over woman it’s that Jesus doesn’t ask for help. Ordinary courage requires that we don’t go it alone. Ordinary courage is inviting others into the space of our fear and working through it.

We have loved ones. We have the ordinary courage to go on. Sometimes to just go on.

“We need only to be aware - to be present to what is happening around us. We need only to take a risk - to speak out even when it is hard - even when our voice shakes. And then we need to do something - to put our hands into doing the work. We can make miracles. My prayer for us today is that we might have the ordinary courage to engage ourselves in this miracle making...”