

“Be Who You Are”

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Will you please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

During this time of Covid and while learning about more ways to support racial equity, I decided to focus some of my reading on courage. Many of us probably think of courage as the ability to do what needs to be done, despite feeling afraid. We might say, in fact, that we have to feel fear to be courageous. For example, some people enjoy public speaking and don't feel any fear at all when they speak. We probably wouldn't call those people courageous, then, when they give a speech. They are just doing what's comfortable and doing what's comfortable doesn't require courage. But many people do feel some amount of fear or anxiety about public speaking. They're worried that they will make a mistake, or fumble their words, or that listeners might become angry, bored, or mean. For them, it takes a certain amount of courage to overcome that fear and give that speech. Courage, then, is the overcoming of fear.

We've witnessed a lot of this kind of courage recently. We've witnessed medical personnel bravely go to work, despite knowing that they could get Covid. We've seen protestors marching for a more equitable society, despite knowing that they could be tear-gassed, beaten, or that they, too, could get Covid. We've heard stories of our black and brown skinned siblings having to walk to work through all white neighborhoods with Confederate flags in the yards. And we know the courage it takes to hang a rainbow flag in our own yards, from our own church, knowing the hatred that it might cause. Seeing these things, we might amend our definition of courage to say that courage is doing what's right or doing what we have to do, despite fear and despite knowing that the consequences might be severe.

But I want to add another aspect to our definition of courage. Sometimes, it takes courage just to be who you are. This is different from the kind of courage we need to face difficult situations. With difficult situations, we have to muster up some courage, but then we can let it go when we are out of that situation. But when just being ourselves causes fear, that means that we have to be courageous all the time.

My guess is that many of us have felt fear about being ourselves. We tell our children, “just be yourself,” because we know that the fear of not being accepted for who we are runs really, really deep in most of us. This fear can be even worse among the marginalized or those who are not considered part of the dominant society. We know from working with the Lakota in Pine Ridge that they still face anger and hatred in the surrounding communities whenever they leave the Reservation. Similarly, our black and other brown skinned siblings are often not accepted in majority white areas. They are regarded as a threat just by existing or being in an all-white space,

and so they may feel afraid just being who they are. And this same fear can be felt deeply by our LGBTQ+ siblings who may have to ask if it is safe to hold hands with their beloved in public. Is it safe to be Out as trans or gay or bi- at work or even in their families? In all of these cases, it can take courage just to be.

But this courage to be is essential. Theologian, Paul Tillich, even claims that it is an ethical imperative. In our Old Testament reading for today, we are reminded that each and every one of us was chosen out and loved by God before we were even born. You were born into your own self, and you were “fearfully and wonderfully made.” So, since God made you into yourself, it is ethically right and good that you BE that self. In so doing, you are affirming both yourself and the God who made you.

Now, it’s definitely true that there are dangerous places for us to be who we are, and I am not recommending that our siblings of color go hang out with Neo-Nazis or that our LGBTQ+ siblings intentionally go into an anti-gay church. There is a fine line between being courageous and being foolish. Instead, I simply want to affirm that every one of us needs to find as many places where we can feel safe and welcome being who we are. And I want to affirm that you are, indeed, deeply loved and known.

But I also want to encourage those of us in the dominant society to keep doing our best to extend our extravagant welcome to everyone. As our Gospel lesson teaches us, whoever welcomes any child of God, welcomes Jesus. In this way, we can help every individual have the courage to BE the person that God has created them to be. This extravagant welcome is one of the missions of our church and one of the many reasons that I have been so overjoyed and proud to be called to serve you. I would go so far as to say that being extravagantly welcoming is a large part of this church’s identity. And at this time—a Sunday when we celebrate our Open and Affirming Covenant, a Sunday in the midst of a time when our country is struggling with racial equity—now is a time to have the courage to be who we are.

And so, I leave you with this quotation which I found in an old church camp songbook. It is often attributed to Joseph Campbell, but one which he found on an unmarked grave in Kansas:

"Be who you is, not who you ain't.

'Cos if you be who you ain't,

you ain't who you is." Amen.