

I see the courage of the Spirit in you and among you.  
Accompanying your spouse in sickness and in health.

Spending your own resources and time to benefit a neighbor who needs help, or someone you work with who is struggling.

Volunteering for one more good cause, because it's so important, even though you're already stretched pretty thin.

Advocating for what matters at your job, even when it goes against the company's bottom line.

And today, I see it in the many members of this church who have quietly ministered to the Motakhasiv family over the past two years: spending countless hours teaching them to drive, making twice-weekly trips to their home to teach them English, spending time calling medical doctors at all hours to make sure the family was safe and healthy, leading a team in the art-not-a-science method of sponsorship, as you figured out how to negotiate government programs, language barriers, and power outages. To others, most of that just looks like you being kind human beings. And you are! But when we look at it with the eyes of faith, it looks like love borne out as courage. It looks like confident faith in the God who accompanies you and empowers you.

The man who was healed by Peter's courageous faith stood up and began to walk. Most of the time, no one is healed in such a miraculous way when we are courageous in faith. But in all the ways you serve with love and courage and confident trust in Christ's Spirit, the result so often is leaping with joy and praise for God!

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God.



April 14, 2024  
Third Sunday of Easter  
"A Courageous Spirit"  
Rev. Emma Nickel  
Scripture: Acts 3:1-10

What can a person do, when they act with courage and confidence? In 1976, Tina Turner showed up at a hotel in Dallas, Texas, after a massive fight with her then husband, Ike Turner. Ike may have been her husband, but he was also something of a captor, tormentor, and boss. He had been abusing Tina for years—physically, emotionally, financially. That night, she looked at the hotel room door and knew that door was the only way out. As writer Will Stenberg wrote in a tribute to Turner after her death last year, "From [that hotel room] she fled across the midnight freeway, semi-trucks careening past her, with 36 cents and a Mobil gas card in her pocket.

Things could have gone a lot of ways from there...What happened instead is that Tina Turner became the biggest global rock star of the 80s...She managed this because of whatever rare stuff she was made of. [Later] she decided to speak publicly about her abusive marriage and forge her own identity, and in doing so give hope and courage to countless women."<sup>1</sup>

I didn't know much about Turner when she passed away last year. I was floored to learn these stories when the tributes poured out about her. I heard in her story great personal courage. And also a kind of confidence that allowed her to speak vulnerably about her experience, even at a time when it was still taboo, and maybe even viewed as shameful, to talk about domestic violence. Turner's courage inspired many other women to find it within themselves to seek freedom and safety.<sup>2</sup>

We read a story in Acts today about courage and confidence. Peter and John arrived at the Temple, where they met a man who, by circumstance or bad luck, had been forced into an existence of lowliness and submission. These men then had an encounter not so different from one you or I might have today in downtown Royal Oak or Detroit. The man in need asked the apostles them for alms, a few coins, anything they could spare.

1 Will Stenberg, posted on Facebook in the days following Tina Turner's death on May 24, 2023  
2 Helen Bushby, "How Tina Turner 'broke the silence' on domestic abuse," BBC, Mary 25, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-65673196>  
3 David Whyte, "Courage," *Psychotherapy Networker*, Jan/Feb 2016, 38.

Most of us know what these encounters feel like. We struggle with our own feelings of guilt, at having so much in comparison. We may feel bad or awkward that we have a lot we could give, but aren't sure it's right to do so. We may give something, whether a bag of items we've prepared or a few dollars. But across the range of emotions, those encounters are often not comfortable ones. And definitely not ones we approach with much confidence about how to respond.

Peter was different. Peter chose to see the man, to acknowledge him fully and give him attention. He had the courage to interrupt his own plans, to converse with someone down and out, and to take seriously the man's concerns. Peter said to the man to "look at us." He asked him to raise his eyes, which were probably lowered and downcast. And in that looking at each other, they were able to connect. Even though we could ask, 'why should it take any bravery for Peter to speak to him?', I think we can recognize, then and now, that it often does. Even people who like to volunteer at shelters or soup kitchens sometimes feel shy speaking to the guests. What should they talk about? What should they ask or say?

The man was courageous, too. He looked at Peter and John, risking the rudeness or taunting of people who actually meant him harm rather than good. Then, Peter showed what the confidence and courage of *faith* could do. Peter announced that he had no money to give. But he issued an imperative: "in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." The description of the power of Christ's spirit healing the man is detailed and precise. His feet and ankles were made strong. He stood up and then he jumped! As he went into the Temple, the man walked, and leaped, and praised God. This was not a quiet spiritual healing. It was a full body restoration that resulted in a full-bodied response to God. The man's leaping and jumping show what kind of freedom he found—not so different from Turners', probably—and how he was certainly going to embrace the gift God gave.

I find healing stories challenging for us modern people to understand. Just a few weeks ago, I was asked if I knew of any Christian miracle healers in our area to recommend. I don't. But the question made me realize how much we want our faith to result in tangible signs of God's power. So often though, the kind of healing I do witness looks quite different. It looks like hearts mended after estrangement; or restoration to a new life after dealing with the hardest mental health challenges; or freedom from addiction that comes only with hard work and lots of support.

The healing of this man is important. But I don't think this story is necessarily a model for us about how people can be healed of physical

ailments with the right words or prayers said. What strikes me most about this story is the confidence and courage of faith that Peter displayed when he spoke those words. He had absolute trust in Jesus Christ. His conviction was that God's power is real and is meant for good. He never seemed to doubt for a second what the Spirit could do for the man. Do we live our faith with that kind of courage and confidence?

We know stories of people who do. There are many famous examples of people whose confident and courageous actions, done in faith, changed the world. Christians who put their lives on the line in the Civil Right movement. People who have sheltered others in times of war or genocide. Faith is often the motivator of such extraordinary and risky actions; trust and confidence in the power of God to work good in the world. And perhaps, also, trust and confidence that God was with them, come what may.

But if courageous faith looks like Tina Turner or the apostle Peter; if it always has big, life-changing, world-changing results, that makes it seem hard for regular people like us to live out. Poet and philosopher David Whyte wrote, "courage is a word that tempts us to think outwardly, to run bravely against opposing fire, to do something under besieging circumstance, and perhaps, above all, to be seen to do it in public."<sup>3</sup> But, he says, the French root of the word is more internal, related to the word 'coeur,' heart. Whyte says "courage is the measure of our heartfelt participation with life...courage is what love looks like when tested by the simple, everyday necessities of being alive." Is that what happened for Peter? Was it really the love of Christ and love for the man that motivated him to interact and offer healing? Was it love for other women in the world suffering domestic abuse that encouraged Turner to speak out about her experience? Is it our love for each other, for our families, for our community that makes us brave enough to do things we never thought we could do? Like care for a parent or spouse who is bed bound or on hospice. Like parent a child with a challenging diagnosis. Like devote our lives to a cause that, a few years ago, we barely understood why it mattered.

Peter acted with love, which took the shape of courage. He acted with confidence because he knew that the gifts of the Spirit were strong, powerful enough to accomplish far more than he could on his own. So perhaps the question for us is not, "what *could* we do *if* we acted courageously in faith?" As if that task were still out in front of us, something we have to achieve. But, what if the question is "how are you *already* acting courageously in faith? How is the Holy Spirit empowering your heartfelt participation in life?"