

“Courage”  
 II Timothy 1:3-7  
 A sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley  
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 University Baptist Church  
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The title of this sermon is courage. It was chosen many weeks ago, not knowing what we would encounter this very week. It has been another surreal week. Daunte Wright’s untimely death came as we were riveted to the Chauvin trial. While the circumstances were different, both Daunte Wright and George Floyd died at the hands of police, the latest in a long line. And a city on edge got edgier. One trauma begets another trauma, or at least it reopens wounds that have not fully healed.

My daughter told me on Monday that I need to rewrite my sermon given what has happened in Minneapolis and Brooklyn Center—the national spotlight shining once again on our neck of the woods.

Actually, I think a sermon about courage is well-timed. Hear this courageous statement released on Monday by the leadership of the Minnesota Council of Churches.

***Minnesota Council of Churches  
 Statement on Killing of Daunte Wright in Brooklyn Center by Police***

*Minneapolis, MN – (April 12, 2021) – Presiding Elder Stacey Smith (President), Rev. Dr. Curtiss Paul DeYoung (CEO), and Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs (Director of Racial Justice) of the Minnesota Council of Churches, issued this statement:*

*The prophet Jeremiah cried out:*

*“A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more” (31:15).*

*Mourning and weeping are heard once again from Minnesota. With the killing of 20 year old Daunte Wright by a police officer in Brooklyn Center another child is no more. Another baby is destined to grow up without a father. Another mother cannot be comforted. Another Black body unnecessarily killed by a law enforcement officer.*

*In moments like this our resolve is tested. In our neighborhoods and in our cities we have not yet processed our grief from last May when George Floyd was killed in the public square, and today the wound in our Black communities is made raw once again.*

*In this moment, we ask the faith community to respond through:*

***Prayers*** – *As people of faith we must pray for the family and friends of Daunte Wright who are mourning and weeping. They are mourning for their child Daunte and weeping for his now fatherless child. We must pray for our neighbors in Brooklyn Center where this injustice occurred. We must pray for African Americans and People of Color who are once again feeling fear, rage, grief, and hopelessness. And we must pray for justice*

*in the ongoing trial of former police officer Derek Chauvin who killed George Floyd in Minneapolis. We must pray for racial justice and equity in our city, state, and nation.*

***Presence*** – Prayers must become presence. In moments like this, outrage is a natural part of grief, which is best processed in community. We invite you to stand with African American church leaders and members in this moment. Stand with the NAACP, Urban League, and other black-led civil rights and community organizations. Stand with courageous young activists who have relentlessly pressed the issues through the senseless police killings of Jamar Clark, Philando Castile, George Floyd, and now Daunte Wright.

***Prophecy*** – Presence must turn into prophecy. Refuse to be comforted. Refuse to rationalize this killing. Speak truth to power. Call for police accountability. Call for Minnesota legislators to take action on proposed police reform bills. Call for a system-wide transformation of policing in Minnesota.

This time in Minneapolis has been surprising and shocking to many white folks. For our BIPOC or AAPI siblings, it has been more of the same, only now in the light of day and on camera. I reminded of Paul's encounter with Jesus. He is struck blind and has to spend three months in the company of those whom he had persecuted. Only after spending so much time listening to their stories, recognizing their humanity, eating their food, and finally confessing his sins, did the scales fall from his eyes. And he saw clearly for the first time. I feel like this is our Damascus moment. Are we willing to admit that we have turned a blind eye to privilege? Are we willing to admit that our underlying assumptions that white culture is normative and inherently good, is a form of idolatry?

When will the scales fall from our eyes?

When will we be worthy of the name Christian—a name that ought to mean solidarity with the outcast and bringers of good news, not just white news, but good news of liberation and dignity for all of God's children?

The Mayor of Brooklyn Center reflected on Monday of the law of perpetual motion. An object in motion tends to remain in motion. Think of what has been in motion. A virus. A system built on inequity that seems to beget more inequity. Despair. Tax breaks and wealth for the well off and lack of opportunity let alone health care or even citizenship for the marginalized. Misinformation on social media and their 24-hour propaganda machine disguised as news.

An object or an idea in motion continues unless something stops it. That's the role of the church. To be an impediment to evil. To be a diversionary conduit for good. To build up a system that is based on something entirely different than all that has hurt us.

Last week we looked at possessions and how the early church sought to hold all things in common and be a force of caring instead of an institution of domination. That's how they lived out the Good News. Next week we'll look at reparations—that term that makes people in positions of domination squirm, but has a biblical basis. Read Luke 19 and tune in next week.

When I was hiking the Superior Hiking Trail a few years ago, I was impressed by the hydraulic engineers who helped maintain the trail. The trail tended to be muddy, a result of the climate, but also of the fact that a well-worn trail tends to become a depression that water really loves. They built boardwalks over the muddiest sections. In other areas, they diverted water off

of the trail and on to another culvert onto which it could drain, quite an engineering feat, taking lots of volunteer hours. I was always thankful for those volunteers.

We are going to do something similar on our church property in the coming months. The storm water wants to flow from our roof to the sidewalks and into the sewers. This overtaxes the watershed and the storm water is unfiltered as it flows into the Mississippi. We'll install four rain gardens and series of underground connectors to help the water bypass the sidewalks and get filtered naturally into the ground where it is cleaned and where it feeds the native plantings. It takes diversion of perpetual motion. It takes intervention.

Imagine if we could be diversionary visionaries.

The church is to be the courageous body that seeks to stop the perpetual motion of organized evil. What we might call sin.

I think that is what we try to do as a church.

We try to offer something that stops the movement of violence.

We seek to put a roadblock up to indifference.

We seek to stop the flow of trauma.

We seek to dig our way out of the pit which we have dug for ourselves.

There is something counter-cultural and subversive about the church, at least there ought to be.

Now, I know there are plenty of iterations of the church that perpetuates the predictable motion of white supremacy and its violent enablers. The church has perpetuated patriarchy and a narrow understanding of truth. But I think there is something better to which we are called. Something that stems the tide, that diverts the stream toward something better.

Today's scripture reading is the salutation at the beginning of the second letter to Timothy. It probably was not written by Paul, but it resembles his practice of bringing greetings and encouragement to the various persecuted and struggling communities. The letters encouraged people when they were despairing.

The writer brings greetings to two women who were obvious leaders in the church, Timothy's mother Eunice and grandmother Lois. My niece Emma has a grandmother named Lois. Lois lost her husband Arvid a few years ago and moved in with my brother's family. In her upper 80's, her body is slowly giving out. Her heart is still sharp. She constantly expresses gratitude for her life and her family. She knows that her years are behind her and not ahead. On Easter, we saw her holding court on the deck, with her baseball hat, mask and walker. She was a model of courage.

The writer of the letter, says to Timothy, because of Lois' faith, I encourage you to take a portion of her resilience, her faithfulness, her moxy.

He says those famous words: "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." (II Timothy 1:7)

It's not a word about getting over yourself. It's not a word saying that everything will be all right or eve easy. It's a word of solidarity. "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." Another word for this would be courage.

I'm reminded of the words of a famous feline:

*What makes a king out of a slave? Courage!*

*What makes the flag on the mast to wave? Courage!*

*What makes the elephant charge his tusk in the misty mist, or the dusky dusk?*

*What makes the muskrat guard his musk? Courage!*

*What makes the sphinx the seventh wonder? Courage!*

*What makes the dawn come up like thunder? Courage!*

*What makes the Hottentot so hot?*

*What puts the "ape" in apricot?*

*What have they got that I ain't got?*

*Dorothy, Scarecrow, Tin Woodsman: Courage!*

We follow in a long line of courageous servants like Lois and Eunice who lived the Gospel of love, justice and peace.

“God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”

Courage, says II Timothy’s author, has three parts to it. Power, love, and self-discipline. Not a spirit of cowardice but rather a spirit of power, love and self-discipline.

Power, we know is not the same thing as domination. Any fool can dominate, by using nefarious tactics and spinning lies. It works for a while, but it is not real power. Real power comes from God. Or more specifically the God-spark that is in each of us. Authority has author as its root. This kind of power is from the author who is in it for the long haul. That long moral arc of the universe that bends toward justice. And we have this power as we seek to faithfully question systems of authority that are based on meanness and flawed logic and hard heartedness. They cannot be of God and therefore are not worthy of authority. God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but a spirit of power.

Power and love.

Love is not self-interest, but care for another.

Love is looking out for your neighbor.

Love is giving support when it’s needed.

Love is the antidote to lonely despair.

It’s a potent medicine.

It’s what we seek to do and be as peacemakers, children of God. It takes courage to love.

Rabbi Michael Litz from Shir Tikveh said on Monday night, “May his memory spark a revolution for justice and compassion and human decency and love. ❤️”

God did not give a spirit of cowardice, but a spirit of power, and of love and of self-discipline. Any athlete knows that you are only as good as your training. Practice makes progress. Once you get out of practice, it’s easy to let your best habits fall by the way side. It’s easy to go with the crowd for the easy way. It takes discipline to be that cog in the wheel, that one who questions, the one who calls another out and holds them accountable.

God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but a spirit of power, and of love and of self-discipline.

Courage is not fool hearty action.

Courage is wisdom and audacity combined.

Reinhold Neibuhr put it this way, “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Be brave. Be courageous. Practice power, love and self-discipline. Look for evidence of courage and be inspired.

Courage is the officers testifying against their own.

Courage is saying I made a mistake. I can't change what happened. I know you might be mad at me. I'll take the punishment I deserve.

Courage is standing up to a bully.

Courage is claiming your voice.

Courage is speaking the truth with love, and power and self-discipline, even if your voice shakes.

And it's what we desperately need.

So exercise your God-given courage.

"God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline."

God gave us courage. Let us use it together.