

How can we be courageous?

Matthew Anderson

HEROES DON'T ALL LIVE in comic books or on movie screens. In fact, for you and I to act courageously doesn't take a six-pack stomach or an invading alien army. Common courage and everyday heroes are what our world needs more than ever. Not only does the world need courage—we need it.

When we don't develop the habit of acting with courage; we act with fear (or fail to act out of fear). Fear can gradually warp our relations with ourselves, with others, and with our loved ones. Being fearful of death, for instance, has made our society escapist and sick. For Christians, courage is a gift of God, modeled by many in the Bible, but especially embodied (Christians say "incarnated") in Jesus. We can share in this kind of courage. But like all good things, developing courage takes practice.

The problem is, we tend to think of courage as something that's "out there" and unusual:

- the Second World War soldier who rushes enemy positions in order to bring a buddy back to safety;
- the Mount Everest climber who holds on to the rope in a storm until she makes it to the top of the world;
- the inner-city football team without any uniforms that overcomes adversity and prejudice to win the city championship on the last play of the game.

Notice that most such cases involve physical exertion and extraordinary circumstances. Sometimes this is true. But sometimes just going through the day-to-day takes courage:

- the young man who leaves his comfortable North American home, his cell phone and his social life to do a difficult short-term position for a charity overseas;

- the wife who is devastated by the passing of her husband yet finally wakes up one morning with the determination that there is still more of life to live;
- the alcoholic who, with help from Alcoholics Anonymous, lives one more day without taking a drink;
- the incest survivor who struggles to build a healthy sexual relationship;
- the student who finally faces down a bully, or carries on despite one;
- the artist who quits his job in order to focus on a novel few believe in but him;
- the parents of a special-needs child who help him or her every day to develop and grow in a world that doesn't seem to care;
- the man or woman who has lost a job and yet gets up every morning and works to find a new one;
- the immigrant who works long hours to help settle her family in a new country.

In Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus gives some advice we still need to hear: "I wanted you to see what real courage is," he says, "instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what." MEG Cabot, an American writer, says, "Courage is not the absence of fear. It's the judgment that something else is more important."

Jesus is someone who knew fear and acted out of courage. He didn't want to die. In fact, he prayed to God to "take this cup (i.e. death) from me." But out of love and for the sake of truth, he taught and healed and spoke out until the moment he was captured and murdered in the most brutal way the first-century Roman Empire had devised. Before his death, he promised his followers they would share in his

spirit, what we call the Holy Spirit. One of the gifts of that spirit is courage.

Take a few seconds to think about something that is troubling you in your life, some situation or dilemma that you are facing. And then ask yourself if one of the following definitions of courage might help:

- to feel fear but take an action or go through an experience anyway;
- to persist with dignity and integrity, despite pain or difficulty;
- to remember, act with, and stand for others;
- to work for what is good, true, beautiful, and unifying even at personal cost;
- to love where there is no guarantee of return;
- to create for no other reason than to help give birth to something new;
- to trust oneself to adventure, embracing unsettledness on the pilgrimage to growth;
- to find the transcendent and redemptive in death, limitation, suffering and weakness.

The secret of courage is no secret at all: it's love. And the source of love is the love of our Creator. The relationship

between love and courage is reciprocal: every small act of courage helps us to remember we are loved and can love, and every small moment of knowing and remembering love helps us act with courage. Sometimes, as for Jesus on the cross, God's love can seem far away. But it is precisely there, when things are darkest, that the Bible tells us God is closest. "Even though I walk through the valley of shadow," says the psalm, "the Shepherd is near me."

C.S. Lewis once wrote: "Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point." In our lives as parents, children, grandparents, students, and businesspeople we live those testing points constantly. The courage our world—and we—need starts in the smallest, day-to-day decisions. Courage is not a wall to be built so much as a path to be walked, a way of mindfulness and practice.

Because we are loved, when we fail to be courageous, we are forgiven. It starts with remembering Christ's love for us. So let us get started, or start again, knowing that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." As they say in French: *Bon courage!*

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Questions for discussion

1. Can you name someone whom you consider to be courageous—someone in public life, and someone who isn't necessarily well known?
2. What gives you courage?
3. Can you think of a time when you've acted courageously?
4. Have you experienced forgiveness when you have failed to show courage, and felt the touch of mercy?