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First Christian Church
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“In the End Is Our Beginning” - Reflections on A Time of Transition

3. Encourage. Encourage

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 NRSV But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. 15 For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. 16 For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

We have been talking these past few Sundays about transition, as my time as your Sr. Pastor nears its close, and as we anticipate welcoming Jonathan Hall as our new Sr. Pastor upon my retirement at the end of this month. We have been looking at Paul's first letter to the church at Thessalonika as our guide for these reflections, since that church and that city were enmeshed in their own time of transition. Today our reflections are joined with the fact that it is All Saints Sunday, a day on which the Church Universal, for well over a millennium, has called to mind and given thanks for all the saints who have died in the last year. Indeed, such earthly death, from the perspective of those of us who remain behind, is the ultimate transition, and human beings since the beginning of time have wondered about what lies on the other side of that ultimate transition.

It is clear from Paul's words in this morning's scripture that those in the Thessalonian church must have themselves been wondering about what happens at death, and in answering that question Paul goes into great and specific detail. Remember, though, that this is Paul's very first letter that we know of. But ten years later, when Paul writes his final letter to the church at Rome, gone is all of this

specificity, all of these “mechanics.” Instead, in the Letter to the Romans, Paul simply and eloquently writes “For I am convinced that there is nothing in all creation – not even death – that will ever separate us from the love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” I think that Paul’s move from the very specific to the very general means that he came to realize what we know: that while there are dozens of depictions and metaphors throughout the Bible for the nature of life eternal, all of them are in fact speculations – yet all of them finally point to the most essential truth of all, the truth that underlies all of our transitions in life, and that is that God can be trusted. God can be trusted to love us now and love us forever.

What most intrigues me this morning about our scripture is it’s final line. After Paul offers his ruminations about how eternal life will work, he says this: “Therefore **encourage** one another with these words.” Now he could have said “comfort” one another or “reassure” one another – these might have seemed the most natural – but instead he says to “**encourage** one another.” Encourage. The literal meaning of the word is to “put courage into.” And in times of transition, even the ultimate transition of death, Paul chooses this word, I think, because indeed what we may need most is the courage to keep on moving forward, the courage to “keep on keeping on,” the courage to walk forward even when the way is cloudy or sad or scary or uncertain. Writer Ann Lamott says that “Courage is fear that has said its prayers,” and on this All Saints Sunday it seems to me that it is through stories of those who displayed such courage in the face of fear that we ourselves might indeed be encouraged. So let me briefly tell you of three remarkable people whose lives indeed serve to encourage us.

Do you know the story of Ruby Bridges? Fifty-seven years ago, the elementary schools in New Orleans were desegregated. Listen as Mrs. Bridges, who was one of half a dozen six-year-olds chosen to attend first grade at a formerly all-white school tells her story: Accompanied by two Federal marshals, she says,

...people shouted and shook their fist when [I] got out of the car.... I held my mother's hand and followed the marshals through the crowd, up the steps into the school.... White parents [were] pointing at us and yelling, then rushing their children out of the school.... Someone had [put] a black doll in a coffin..... [The next morning, my mother couldn't accompany me, but told me] "Remember, if you get afraid, say your prayers.... That was how I started praying on the way to school. The things people yelled at me didn't seem to touch me. Prayer was my protection.... [My teacher watched me walk into school every day.] One morning when I got to our classroom, she said she'd been surprised to see me talk to the mob. "I saw your lips moving," she said, "but I couldn't make out what you were saying to those people." I wasn't talking to them," I told her. "I was praying for them." Please be with me, I'd ask... God, and be with those people too.

Forgive them because they don't know what they're doing.¹

In recent years Ruby Bridges story has gotten widespread attention as Scholastic Books has picked it up and made sure many, many elementary school students know the story of a very brave little girl, one for whom, indeed, courage was fear that had said its prayers – and her courage has been contagious.

Another story is from my wife Barbara from the time when she was the pastor of a church in downtown Indianapolis. Listen to how she tells it²:

The woman's name was Henrietta – Henri to her friends. She is gone now but at the time I met her, Barbara says, she was a very young 75 year old; a tiny lady--maybe five foot two. Petite. Beautiful. She was the Moderator of the church, a congregation made up of a lot of people older than she. Imagine the setting, as Barbara describes it:

¹<http://www.rubybridges.com/story.htm>

²I'm grateful to share and adapt verbatim much of Barbara's phrasing of this powerful story, which she shared with First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Tacoma, Washington, where she is the Senior Pastor in her sermon "Their Deeds Follow," October 29, 2017.

an older sanctuary that once grandly seated up to a thousand people, a little run down at the heels now. Worship was just beginning for the faithful few who were there, each person finding their seats on their own, the need for ushers long since past. Suddenly the side door opens, and in strides a young man barely out of his teens. He is dressed in leather and has lots of piercings. Now, this is a small church in a mid-sized, conservative, Midwestern city. But thanks be to God, nobody told this young man that his kind don't normally show up in church – and in he comes, with his multiple piercings and his neck-to-toe black leather.

The young man went and sat toward the front on the side by the door through which he entered, near where Henri always sat. Not long into the service he began to cry. Barbara says “I'm not talking a few tears here. I am talking chest-wracking sobs.” Everybody in that tiny congregation can see his gut-wrenching pain. Barbara said that she didn't know what to do from her place up front. But she sighed with relief when she saw Henri slip in beside the young man, handing him tissues before he can wipe his nose on his jacket sleeve again. And she pats his hand and whispers calming things.

Barbara said that it was simple, really, what Henri did. She became his god-grandmother. His name was Jim, and as it turns out Jim desperately needed a grandmother because his family had disowned him. Sometimes we just need a grandmother or a grandfather. Who is it in your life whose face lights up more than anyone else's when you come to visit than your grandparents? This young man had been rejected by his family. He was gay and had AIDS in a time and place when both caused so much fear. There was no one left in his life, Barbara says, whose face lit up because he came into the room. There was no one to even notice whether he was there or absent. Indeed, most folks were terrified when he showed up. Can you imagine a life where no one would miss you if you failed to show up? No one whose face lit up when you walked in? And the loneliness and isolation and meaninglessness

got to this young man. It finally got to him. So, he screwed up his courage and came to church. He started showing up to church.

And every Sunday that he came, Henri's face just lit up. So, he kept coming. And pretty soon, more people began to smile and let the light shine in their eyes when Jim walked in. And they blessed him. They lit up their faces over him and showed them in their countenance, that he was God's own beloved child. And as they got to know him a bit, they shared their faith, the story of God's blessings upon their lives and they taught him some important wisdom for living. Henri showed Jim that he was a beloved child of God, and Henri showed by her simple but courageous act of Christian care and love what Jesus talked about. And by her courage, she too gave courage to those around her, those in that church who might have been scared of the AIDS hysteria, or who simply weren't sure how to react to someone so open about their pain. But Henri knew, and in her courage she displayed her sure faith that God was working to bring the Kingdom of love and justice, even to conservative Indiana. And her courage too, like Ruby Bridges', was contagious.

A third story: He died in April of 2005, a remarkable man whose life was both triumph and tragedy, whose journey showed the best of America and the worst. Fred Korematsu was the American-born son of Japanese immigrants. In early 1942 all those of Japanese ancestry on the west coast were rounded up with little more than 24 hours notice, told that they could take only the clothes on their back and what they could carry, had their homes and businesses confiscated, and were sent off to internment camps far, far from home. Fred Korematsu, active with his parents in their Oakland church, a quiet man but strong in his Christian faith, decided to oppose the order and he fled and hid. He was eventually captured and incarcerated first in a manure-filled horse stall, and then was sent to another camp further inland. But Fred continued to fight his own situation and that of those of his fellow Americans of Japanese ancestry.

However, a few months later, his legal challenge ended at the Supreme Court, which affirmed that the internment of Japanese-Americans was permissible.

For the next 50 years, Fred lived a quiet life, relishing his home, his family, and his church. But times were never easy; few employers would hire a convicted felon. But in the 1980s, friends helped re-open his case. And Fred, by all accounts one who shunned the limelight and derived deep contentment from his simple role as an usher at his congregation, was convinced that what had happened to him and 120,000³ others was not right, did not represent the best of America and was not what God intended for a people where, as Paul would put it, there is to be neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free. And by dint of quiet work, sustained by his faith and helped by his friends, Fred's conviction was finally overturned and President Reagan issued an apology for those internments of forty years earlier.

Fred Korematsu, too, was one who knew about courage being fear that has said its prayers. And his prayers bore fruit and his quiet courage inspired others who took up both his cause and the larger cause that no such thing such ever happen again, for it violated both the deepest ideas of country and faith. Fred never thought of himself as a hero, never thought of himself as particularly courageous. But, in that he was mistaken: for like Ruby Bridges, like Henri, his courage too was contagious.

On this All Saints Sunday, as we remember those who have gone from us, I would also invite each of us to remember and give thanks for how someone special in our lives, someone whose face lit up over us, helped show us more of how to be courageous or how to love life a little more fully or how to reach out to those who were hurting. For Paul is right: we do not grieve as those without hope for we have known hope – and courage and love and beauty – in this life and we know that God assures us

³http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_American_internment See also <http://www.nps.gov/manz>

that such things do not ultimately end but are forevermore safe and cherished unto eternity.

And so, echoing Paul one final time, indeed let us “encourage one another with these words,” as we stand and sing: The first two verses of “For All the Saints” in your Chalice Hymnal, No. 637.