

“Fearless Faith”

Genesis 12.7-8; Ruth 1.16-18; Genesis 45.14-15; Daniel 3.28; Acts 10.44-45; Matthew 28.19-20

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July 24, 2016

I spent the better part of the week up at Camp Greenwood, and it was a good week. For those of you who don't know, Camp Greenwood is the church camp up near Greenville (about 90 minutes northwest of here) that belongs to our presbytery, a consortium of 60 churches in central and western Michigan. The camp has been through a *lot* in the past several years, and I'm not going to talk about all that today – if you want details, ask me later or talk to Barb Tornholm, the most recent moderator of the Greenwood Agency. Suffice it to say that the camp has suffered from weak leadership and financial difficulties, and the long-term viability of the camp has been in doubt. Every year for the past five years I've spent a week as a chaplain for one of their summer camps, leading morning and evening chapel, counseling kids as needed, helping the camp staff, and playing and interacting with a bunch of young, budding Christians who are a lot of fun to be around – including, this time, Diane Devoe's grandson Parker, and Margaret Doolittle's granddaughter Grace, both of whom are veterans from previous years.

We had quite a diverse group this year. Most of the campers were from churches like ours, but there was a large group from Advent House, a ministry on MLK Boulevard that provides transitional housing and other services for needy residents of Lansing. That created a rich environment of cultural diversity. In addition, about half of the camp staff were recruited from an international Christian camp staffing agency, so we had one counselor from Mexico, two from Scotland, one from Spain, at least one from England, and several more from other places in Europe and I don't remember them all. *That meant that half the staff was wandering around talking something like this all week long, which was quite entertaining and frankly pretty awesome, or as my new friends from Britain would say, “brilliant.”* That led to even *more* rich conversation. One of my new friends from Scotland told me, among other things, about the sad and dramatic decline of Christianity in Scotland. He says that as a university student he often feels ridiculed by other students; the cultural perception is that you can't be intellectual *and* a Christian at the same time. The camp theme this year was “Fearless Faith,” and for this counselor, that theme was right on target. In the world he lives in, it takes *guts* to be a Christian.

Every single member of the staff was new this year; there was not a single person returning from last year. Yet even with all that change, every single camp tradition that the campers care about was still firmly in place. The staff went out of their way to make sure that for the returning campers, Greenwood felt as much like *Greenwood* as possible – with a couple new twists, including a closing campfire *in* the Lake. Ever cooked a s'more from a floating *canoe* before? We did, Thursday night.

The camp theme unfolded over the week through a series of biblical stories. On Sunday we talked about God calling Abraham to make a new home in the land of Canaan (Genesis 12): *the courage to show up*. On Monday we talked about Ruth's decision to leave her homeland behind, to accompany her widowed mother-in-law back to Bethlehem (Ruth 1): *the courage to trust*. On Tuesday we talked about Joseph's decision to forgive his brothers, after they had thrown him into a pit and left him for dead many years earlier (Genesis 45): *the courage to forgive*. On Wednesday we talked about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's decision to bow down *only* to the Lord God and not to a statue, even though it meant Nebuchadnezzar would throw them into a fiery furnace (Daniel 3): *the courage to stand*. On Thursday we talked about Peter's discovery that the church needed to welcome Gentile believers into its midst (Acts 10): *the courage to change*. And on Friday we talked about Jesus's instructions to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28): *the courage to connect*. It was a good set of lessons. How do you know (like Abraham) when God is calling you to completely change your whole way of life? How can you trust (like Ruth) that things are going to turn out okay when you are heading into a place of potential risk and danger? How can you truly forgive (like Joseph) other people who have *really, really hurt* you? How can you boldly take a stand for what's right (like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) when everyone else is going along with the crowd and when you know you're going to *suffer* for your choice? How do you know (like Peter) that God is telling the church that something absolutely *must* change? How do you tell other people about Jesus when you know that some people are going to scoff at you? Great questions; great conversation. On the "forgiveness" night the kids wanted to talk about school bullying and name-calling, two *huge* issues in their world. I asked them how many of them had ever been called a name they didn't like. *Every single hand* went up. I asked them how many of them had ever called somebody *else* a name. I think I saw every single hand go up for that one too. This is the culture they're growing up in. One of the groups created a skit about standing up to a bully. In the skit the bully backed down and apologized, and everybody hugged each other, but when I asked them, "Now, would it happen that simply in *real* life?" the answer was a resounding *no*. It takes *real guts* to stand up to a bully – *fearless faith*. The next night we were talking about having courage to do what's right, and I asked them to give me examples of people who had that kind of courage. They mentioned Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela. Then I asked them to give me examples of things they sometimes feel pressured to do. At this point the group was mostly 9- through 12-year-olds; the older youth were up at North Point. These younger kids came up with a very long list of things like lying and stealing and TP'ing houses and swiping other kids' bags of candy on Halloween night, but *one* of them – an 11-year-old boy from a church like ours – mentioned the pressure to drink. We talked about the *risk* you take when you have the courage to say "no" to your friends: ridicule, maybe losing a friendship. What does it take? *Fearless faith*. On the last day, I asked the group to tell me *why* we should be telling other people about Jesus. What's so *special* about him, what's so *important*? At first my question was met with total silence. Finally one of the girls said, "Because he's the Son of God." That was a good place to start. From there we talked about his life, his ministry; his healings, the demons he cast out, his teachings; then we talked about his death; the cross, forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God; then we talked about his resurrection; new life in Christ, joy, freedom, hope; then we talked about his ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit; sanctification, holiness, growing and maturing in Christ. With some prompting, they knew *most* of the story. All sorts of reasons to tell people about Jesus! But talking about Jesus is risky. You risk rejection. You risk ridicule. What do you need? *Fearless faith*.

The last night, after sunset, the older campers and three counselors and I headed off across the street, into the woods for the faith walk. This is a tradition reserved exclusively for the older kids, the more mature ones. There's a path in the woods, a straight path, lined with tall trees and the sounds of nature all around you. You walk down that path, one by one. You can't see the person in front of you, or the person behind you. It's your time to be alone with God. It's not long, only a few minutes ... but it feels like an eternity. All you can see is about twenty feet of the path in front of you, and silhouettes of trees all around you. As I took my own walk down that path, I did what I typically do on the faith walk: I started talking to God, out loud. Thanking God for the many blessings he's put in my life; asking for wisdom and courage for the road ahead and the challenges I encounter along the way. I'd been wrestling all week with a question – what's the next big thing I need to do for my own personal spiritual development? – and there, in the dark, with the light of God's grace illuminating my path, God gave me an answer. Clarity. Now I just have to muster up the courage to *do* it. What do I need? *Fearless faith*.

See, none of us are called to stay the same. God has a purpose and a plan for each and every one of our lives. Choices he'd like us to make. Avenues he'd like us to walk down. We don't get to just say, "Okay, now I'm a Christian," and never take any risks. No – God invites us to *grow*. To do things that strike *fear* into our hearts. Abraham left his homeland. Ruth chose her family over her country. Joseph forgave and embraced. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego said "no" to culture and said "yes" to God. Peter realized the church needed to change. And Jesus calls *all* of us to go make disciples.

Earlier this year we discerned that we need to make a change here. Like Peter in that story in Acts 10, God has given us a message and is asking us to change. We need to work on evangelism. We need to do a better job sharing our faith with people outside our walls, in ways that connect with where people truly are. This doesn't come easily or naturally to most Presbyterians. We realized right away that we don't know how to do this well, that we need some training. Our Natural Church Development team is reading a book right now that's going to help us, and you'll hear more about that in the months to come. God made it clear to me that there were some things I needed to talk about with you, so virtually every sermon I've given over the past few months has touched on evangelism in *some* way. I'm nearing the end of that list; there's just one more topic God has laid on my heart; that's up next week, and honestly, I'm nervous about because it's going to be a big stretch and I really don't know how you all are going to respond. What am I going to need next week? *Fearless faith*. What are *we* going to need in the months to come, as we go deeper into this world of evangelism? *Fearless faith*. The kind of faith that Abraham had, that Ruth had, that Joseph had, that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had, that Peter had. *Fearless faith*. The stories worth remembering, worth sharing, worth passing down from one generation to the next, aren't the stories of the Christians who chickened out, who failed to do what God wanted them to do. No – the stories worth remembering, worth sharing, worth passing down are the stories of the Christians who mustered up *fearless faith* to do the very *hard* things God was asking them to do. God has asked us to do something very hard. Something that is going to require courage. And risk. We could chicken out and become a forgettable church that withered up and died away, like so many other churches. Or we could muster up *fearless faith* and do what God's calling us to do. To face our fears and – with Christ's help – to *conquer* them. I know which choice *I'd* rather make.

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