

“Courage and Prayer”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 27, 2025

7th Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Romans 8:31-32, 37-39

My first weekend youth group outing – as a 7th grader – took place at Otter Creek State Park, overlooking the Ohio River, just west of Louisville. We were not permitted to hike alone, so three of us – Chris, Kelly, and I – had gone together. Foolishly, we would take turns grabbing onto the trunk of a tree, swinging out over the edge of the trail, where a steep bluff fell to the railroad tracks along the riverbank below.

Kelly took his turn, spun over the edge and...snap. The tree trunk broke and Kelly tumbled down, bouncing over and again. As soon as he stopped, motionless at the bottom, Chris said to me, “go get help” and down he went, sliding feet-first, but sometimes tumbling himself, toward our friend. I turned and ran, as fast as I could, toward the cabin to tell our leaders who, after they saw my face, had no trouble understanding the urgency of my appearance.

All things considered, Kelly was okay – he had a broken arm and some cracked ribs, lots of scrapes and cuts. Chris fared better. Later, I told him I admired his courage for helping without hesitation, but he told me – and, in retrospect, I think it’s probably true – “you would have done the same thing.”

What gives us courage in the face of danger or suffering or evil or persecution? Beyond youthful fearlessness, what is it that allows people of faith to be, as the Apostle Paul says in these verses to the church-people of Romans, “more than conquerors through him that loved us?”

Cornelia “Corrie” ten Boom helped hide and protect hundreds of Jews during the German occupation of the Netherlands in the Second World War. Her deeply held religious beliefs led her to work closely with the Dutch resistance to Nazi persecution. Her courage and defiance led to her eventual arrest, imprisonment, and internment in two concentration camps. Several family members died while in German custody.

Corrie ten Boom was born into a devout Protestant family in Amsterdam and grew up in the city of Haarlem, where her family owned a watch shop. She and her family devoted time and resources to numerous charitable activities. Her father led daily morning and evening times for scripture and prayer for family members, employees and any visitors present. Both Corrie and her older sister, Betsie, never married and lived at home, working in the watch shop.

World War II began in September 1939 when Germany invaded Poland. In May of 1940, the Nazis invaded and occupied the Netherlands. Using the watch shop as a cover, members of the ten Boom family became involved in the resistance, procuring ration books, relocating Jews, and eventually taking in people who could not find other hiding places because of their illness, appearance, or other circumstances.

While their home became the center of the underground resistance in Haarlem, it wasn't because of ingenuity or experience, but the result of a communal effort to resist. They simply said "yes." Hide this pregnant woman? Yes. Your hiding spot isn't great, can we build a fake wall? Sure. You need a buzzer to alert people, can I install it? Of course. You need secret codes? I can teach you. You need to do drills to make sure people can hide quickly? Okay. Their faith in God and others encouraged them to repeatedly say yes in the face of danger.

In February of 1944, during a morning prayer meeting, Nazi authorities raided the home. The Gestapo arrested more than thirty people, including the 51-year-old Corrie, her father, two sisters, a brother, and a nephew. Six other people, among them Jews and members of the Dutch resistance, concealed themselves in a hiding place during the raid and remained undiscovered, rescued days later by other members of the resistance.

Corrie's father, Casper – then 84 years old – died in the prison hospital just ten days after his arrest. Corrie and Betsie were transferred in June to a concentration camp in the Netherlands, and in September to the brutal Ravensbruck concentration camp in Germany. Upon admission, every prisoner was searched; all except Corrie who had managed to smuggle a bible in with her. The sisters managed to stay together, holding secret bible readings and prayer meetings with other non-Jewish prisoners, until Betsie died in December.

In her memoir, *The Hiding Place*, Corrie describes how often she would pray for some little miracle to happen and how she was able to see the good in others, that even her captors were not evil people but tortured souls who could be changed by the love of God. Her courage and faith gave her not only the ability to endure suffering, but to discover how God could work through her to bring hope and peace to others. “There is no pit so deep,” she wrote, “that God’s love is not deeper still.”

In late December 1944, Corrie was released from Ravensbruck and, along with other former prisoners, traveled by train to Berlin, arriving on New Year’s Day, 1945. Eventually, she reached the Netherlands, where she reunited with surviving members of her family.

After the war, Corrie ten Boom helped administer a home for people who had survived concentration camps. Inspired by her late sister Betsie, and her favorite scripture – Romans 8 – she engaged in rehabilitation work with Dutch collaborators and in dialogues with former Nazi perpetrators. In the following decades, she traveled the world as an evangelist, social critic, and motivational speaker. In 1975, *The Hiding Place* was made into a movie.

What is it that gives us the courage to act in the face of danger and put even our own lives at risk for the sake of others? Corrie Ten Boom cited the faith of her family members, especially her father and sister, for teaching her the importance of Christian practices to prepare us for what we may encounter. Her involvement in the resistance was based on the depth of her love for God learned from childhood in those daily bible readings and the discipline of prayer. There was no hiding place that could separate her from the light of God’s word; no prison cell that prevent her belief that we are – not will be but are – more than conquerors in Christ.

Paul’s words of reassurance to the Romans should not be mistaken as a promise that one’s positive actions will always result in positive life outcomes. Nor should we hear in Paul’s words that all things that happen in life are good in and of themselves. The holocaust was not in any way good, even if some people, like Corrie ten Boom, found ways to survive it and even help others through it. Just as,

for example, a promotion at work is not the result of diligent prayer, likewise a personal tragedy is not a gift from God.¹

When we engage in prayer – whether alone or together – it is not simply to ask God that our circumstances might be changed, that we may find relief from some present suffering, but also that we, ourselves, might be strengthened, encouraged, and changed through it; and that others might come to see the love of God from which we will never be separated.

As we have been reminded during these weeks of studying Holy Disruptors in the history of the Christian faith, different times and circumstances require varying responses. Sometimes, as with the Desert Mothers and Fathers of the early church, this might mean removing yourself – physically or psychologically – from the powers that be. Other times, as with Martin Luther and the Reformers, it could mean pressing for transformed practices and beliefs. And in still other circumstances, like the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands during World War II, it meant for Corrie ten Boom and her family resisting authority by aiding the most vulnerable.

Each of these varied faithful responses require the courage to take a risk: whether it is the loss of community, status, or even life. Today's unique times and circumstances will also require us to take certain risks: maybe not tumbling down a cliff or joining the underground, but the gospel always asks us to give up certain aspects of our lives – whether comfort or security, resources or traditions – to gain what is truly life: faith and abundance in God's presence.

And so, may we engage in the prayer and practices of the faith that will prepare us; so that we will be ready to respond, to act when the time comes, to courageously risk loss, and to share the gracious love of God with and for others; so that we might be “more than conquerors through him that loved us.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Anna M. V. Bowden from *WorkingPreacher.com*