

THE SCHOOL OF COURAGE

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Psalm 27:1-6; 1 John 4:7-21

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear”

– 1 John 4:18a

Less than two weeks ago, we heard the news of another school shooting, at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Then, this past week, we got word of yet another violent assault, at a high school in Highlands Ranch, Colorado: just outside Denver. Two students dead in North Carolina, and four wounded. One dead and eight wounded in Colorado.

The story has become all too familiar: and, sadly, we've all become rather numb to it. “Did you hear there was another school shooting?” is what we say. Think about the full implication of those words: “*another* school shooting.” Those two words — “school” and “shooting” — just don't belong together. Together, they are an obscenity. Add the modifier, “another,” and the once-unimaginable has become routine.

None of us like it. All of us decry our national obsession with violence. But the sheer frequency of these horrible crimes has — sadly — made them a feature of our national life.

These two recent incidents, though, were different from most of the rest. In

both North Carolina and Colorado, one of the dead was a student who courageously rushed the attacker, putting himself in harm's way so more of his classmates could live. Both those young men — Riley Howell in North Carolina and Kendrick Ray Castillo in Colorado — played a role in subduing the murderer. Without their quick decision to run forward, not back, police say, many more innocent students would have died.

I wonder: what goes through the mind of a person who makes that fateful decision to go forward, not back? Did those young men pause for a moment to assess the risk, to count the cost? Or did they make a snap decision, almost without thinking, their bodies in motion almost before their minds have caught up with them?

What motivated their decision? Was it anger called forth by the epidemic of violence, sheer rage directed at the gunman who invaded their classroom? Or was it love for their fellow students? “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends,” Jesus says in John 15:13. That is, quite literally, what these young men did. They laid down their lives for their friends.

Whatever thoughts and emotions motivated their actions, there's a word we associate with that kind of decision. It's a word that was all over the news media in the hours and days that followed. That word is “courage.”

Today's scripture from 1 John says, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." With freedom from fear on our minds, and with the beloved Mother's Day holiday now upon us, it's a pretty good text to spend some time with, don't you think?

Although 1 John 4:18 never uses the word, this is a text about courage — which, many of us would agree, is the opposite of fear. To be perfectly correct, though, that's not really the case — plenty of courageous people have done what they had to do, even though they were feeling pretty scared at the time — but courage is certainly a necessary virtue for any who would avoid living as slaves to fear.

So, what *is* courage? It's a question they asked at Oxford University some years back, in the final exam for a philosophy course. The professor had told the students there would be just one essay question on this exam. As he handed out the examination papers, the students learned the question was simplicity itself. It was just three words: "What is courage?"

They opened their blue books — which, young people, is what we oldsters used to use to take exams — and set out to write. Five minutes into the exam, the

students were surprised to see one of their classmates get up, hand the professor his blue book, and leave the room.

That student got the British equivalent of an “A” on the exam. His answer, it turned out, was just three words.

Want to know what he wrote — what three words answered the question, “What is courage?” What he wrote was: “This is courage.”

Maybe it was the best possible answer: an answer delivered not just in word, but in deed.

So, how do we acquire this virtue called courage? Where do we learn it?

In many ways, learning courage is a lifelong task, but for most of us, that learning process begins with our very first teachers in this life: our mothers (or whoever it was who raised us).

Young children are naturally fearful of many things, but as they grow and face new challenges, their mothers (as well as other adults who share the parenting role) teach them how to master their fears. They teach them what they can safely do themselves (like petting the friendly dog from next door when the owner says it’s OK). They also teach them what they must avoid doing (like chasing a ball out into the street). For most of us, our first school of courage is at our mother’s knee.

In order to live courageously, we've got to learn to put our fears into proper perspective. That's not an easy task: because the instinct to fear is a very ancient one in the human race. It's hard-wired into our brains.

We've always known that. Way back in the 18th century, the political philosopher Edmund Burke observed, "No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear."

Legendary Notre Dame football coach Knute Rockne knew it, too. In a tactic that would never be possible under today's rules, Rockne once prepared for a major game by sending his assistant coaches out into all the rough, working-class bars of South Bend. Their orders were to recruit the meanest-looking characters they could find, as long as they met one criterion: they had to be really, *really* big. Coach Rockne put them all in Notre Dame football uniforms and had them run out onto the field with the real team members. He had no intention of playing them he couldn't have done that in any case, because it was clearly against the rules). He just wanted those giants to sit with the real Notre Dame players, where the opposing team could see them. Their mere presence on bench was enough. Fear did its work. Notre Dame won a resounding victory.

In recent years, brain researchers have figured out where, in the brain, the

fear impulse is located. Fear lodges in a little structure called the amygdala. It's deep within our brains. The full function of the amygdala is only dimly understood: but — from the standpoint of evolution — it's clearly a very primitive structure. Fear, in other words, has been with us for a very long time.

Looking back through the eons, some people have taken to calling this very ancient portion of the brain “the lizard brain.” It does seem to act in response to primitive urges, especially the urge to survive.

Brain scientists have discovered a prominent connection among brain cells located between the amygdala (where fear appears to dwell), and the cerebral cortex (where our thinking and reasoning take place). That connection is broad, like a superhighway. It can handle a whole lot of traffic.

That means, if our senses take in an image or a sound that makes us fearful, the fear section of the brain instantly lights up. Our lizard brain sends unmistakable messages to our reasoning faculties: *“Hey, wake up! Danger this way!”*

Now, you want to know what's really interesting? The scientists have discovered that connection — broad as it is — is pretty much a one-way street. If the journey from the brain's fear center to its reasoning center is a superhighway, then the connection to travel in the opposite direction is just a footpath through the

woods.

Bottom line? It's easy to get the fear center of the brain to tell the reasoning center what it's got to do, but it's hard to get the reasoning center to say to the source of our fears, "Take it easy, it's nothing to worry about." Our brains are wired to make it difficult to talk ourselves down from fear.

This, again, goes back to more primitive days for the human species. A dozen millennia ago, we set out, trusty spear in hand, to go woolly-mammoth-hunting. Our eyes took in the image of a saber-toothed tiger, ready to pounce, and passed it on down that superhighway to the fear center. Now, that fear center isn't especially interested in entertaining questions from the reasoning center about what variety of saber-toothed tiger it may be. "Fight, flight or freeze! That's it. Three choices. Pick one and go with it!

So, this fear-based way of functioning is ideally situated to that sort of life-or-death situation. Yet, what if it's a more complex situation, and a little reasoning is called for?

Let's leave the paleolithic era and come back to the present day. Let's imagine we're in the waiting room of a doctor's office. A woman comes in, wearing a hijab, and sits down in the chair across from us. Do we bury our head in

our magazine because of the chance — however remote — that she has something to do with terrorism? Or do we engage her in neighborly conversation?

If our brain's reasoning center is flooded with fear-center messages, neighborly courtesy could be a difficult proposition. Yet, what if the reasoning center could reverse the flow of information along those neural circuits? What if the reasonable cerebral cortex could say to the lizard-brain amygdala, "Hey, cool it!"? *Most Arab-Americans want nothing to do with terrorism*, our reasoning brain would remind us. *Their faith, like ours, teaches peaceful living and mutual understanding*. That would be a good thing.

Here's another example. Someone did a psychology experiment, not long after the 9/11 attacks. The researchers set up a life-insurance booth in an airport. When airline passengers came up to the booth, they were told there were two types of policies available. Both cost exactly the same.

One was a general "Flight Insurance" policy, that included, among others things, acts of terrorism. The other was specifically called a "Terrorism Insurance" policy. That policy covered death from only one cause: acts of terrorism.

When the phony insurance salespeople — who were really psychology researchers in disguise — asked their customers which policy they preferred,

nearly all of them said they wanted Terrorism Insurance. They did that even after being reminded that the competing product covered not only terrorism, but all other causes of death.

Clearly, the general life insurance policy was a superior product. But in those panicky times after 9/11, fear ruled the day. The desire to be free of fear actually short-circuited the brain's reasoning capacity.

So how do we subdue that kind of reason-busting fear?

If our verse from 1 John is correct — “Perfect love casts out fear” — then a prime way to mitigate fear is to cultivate our capacity to love others, and be loved in return. It's the lesson a good mother teaches her children. In these fearful times, it's probably our best hope for recovering a sense of normalcy in our lives.

Yet, what about that troubling adjective in the Bible verse: “perfect”? “*Perfect* love casts out fear.” What mother can be perfect, when it comes to loving her children?

I don't think the author means by that word “perfect” what we most often take it to mean. When you or I hear that word, we usually define it as “Totally without flaws.” That's not necessarily what the Bible means in using it. The Greek word is *teleios*. It's a fascinating, complex term with many nuances of

meaning. *Teleios* can be translated not only as “perfect,” but also as “finished,” “completed,” “mature.” It’s like what we mean in grammar by “the perfect tense.” In that setting, “perfect” simply means an action that’s been completed. *Been there, done that.*

According to that interpretation, a mother’s “perfect love” for her child is not a matter of being some kind of Tiger Mom. It just means she’s taken love out of the realm of private feelings and communicated it by word or deed — and she’s done so again and again, over time.

I don’t know about you, but to me, that interpretation sounds like a word of grace for hard-working moms out there: not a word of judgment. Perfect love really is within our grasp, if that’s what the adjective means.

Of course, what it could also refer to is the love of God. Those letters of John are shot through with love, both human and divine. Clearly the love of God is primary: our lesser, human loves somehow participate in divine love and reflect it. “We love because God first loved us,” as another verse puts it. In that sense, we can *all* practice perfect love, no matter our personal shortcomings: because if the love we receive and pass on to others originated as the love of God, we couldn’t possibly ruin it!

Let me conclude with a story that comes from a Christian spiritual writer from India, by the name of Sundar Singh. He told of a trip he once took to Tibet.

He and a Tibetan guide were making their way on foot, over a high mountain pass. The weather had turned suddenly bad, with icy winds and blowing snow. Singh and his guide were beginning to wonder if they could make it to the next village alive.

Suddenly they saw, lying at their feet, another traveler who had slipped from the path. He was still alive, but just barely. Singh insisted they pick the man up and carry him with them to the village

His guide refused. This was a matter of survival, he told him. They couldn't possibly carry the man. If they tried, all three of them would die in the snow. No, the best course was to press on to the village as fast as they could, then send back a rescue party.

The two of them had a falling-out. Singh refused to abandon the man. The guide left them, heading down the trail to the village. Singh, as weary as he was, threw the injured traveler over his shoulders and picked his slow way down the path.

Here's the rest of the story in his own words:

“How we made it, I do not know. But just as daylight was

beginning to fade, the snow cleared and I could see houses a few hundred yards ahead. Near me, on the ground, I saw the frozen body of my guide. Nearly within shouting distance of the village, he had succumbed to the cold and died, while the unfortunate traveler and I made it to safety. The exertion of carrying him and the contact of our bodies had created enough heat to save us both. This is the way of service. No one can live without the help of others, and in helping others, we receive help ourselves.” — Sadhu Sundar Singh, excerpted from *Wisdom of the Sadhu*

I’m not sure I can think of a better example than that of the sort of bold, courageous love we’ve been talking about. “Perfect love casts out fear.”

Such love may not be the way of the world — which continues to be ensnared by all sorts of fears, both rational and irrational. But it certainly is the way of Jesus Christ. Mothers, fathers, sons, daughters: follow him, and it can become your way, too!

Let us pray:

**So often it seems to us, O God,
that, compared to all the forces of fear and self-interest in the world,
the power of love is but a puny thing.
Remind us again and again —
as often as we need to hear it —
that the love you offer us in Jesus Christ,
and charge us to share with others,
is nothing less than the very power
that set the stars in their courses
and made life to grow in wild profusion
upon this rocky sphere,
spinning in the icy emptiness of space.
Give us confidence that,**

**every time we take the risk of loving others,
you bless our efforts,
pushing back the gloom of fear and doubt forever.**

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