

**Building the House of Love:
BUILDING COURAGE**

I Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11

The house of love is in a tough neighborhood.

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. Reeves
First United Methodist Church
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It's bad enough to mess up; it's even worse to mess up for all the world to see.

Caroline Marcil was a 24-year-old singer from Montreal, Canada. A few years ago she had the opportunity to sing the national anthems of both the United States and Canada at a hockey game in Montreal. Since the Americans were visitors, she began first to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner." A number of Canadian hockey fans began to boo, and Caroline got so flustered, she forgot the words. She apologized and stepped back into the stands to retrieve the words. Then, when she stepped back onto the ice, she slipped and went sprawling. The crowd roared with laughter. Caroline crawled off the ice and disappeared under the stands, never to reappear. The game began without either anthem being sung.

To make matters worse, the video of her performance was instantly flashed around the world and viewed all over the internet and television the next day. Can you imagine the embarrassment?

However, the story has a happy ending. Caroline was invited by "Good Morning, America" to come and sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" on their show later in the week, which she did—flawlessly and without printed words.¹

Hockey rinks are notoriously tough neighborhoods. You know what they say, "I went to a fight and a hockey game broke out." They're especially tough in Canada when you're singing the American national anthem!

As Christians, we should be accustomed to tough neighborhoods. Physically, we may live in a very nice community. But the house of love—which we have been constructing over the last few weeks—is in a very tough neighborhood. We live in the tough neighborhood of sin and disease, grief and despair, conflict and hostility, guilt and anxiety, viruses and social distancing. You name a problem that afflicts humanity, and it resides in the neighborhood where we are trying to build the house of love. We cannot escape.

Sometimes we are surprised by the problems we still have to face as disciples of Jesus. One would think that we would be spared all of that. After all, God is on our side, right? Can't God keep bad stuff from happening to us? He can; but he won't, and there's a reason for that.

The writer of First Peter addressed this feeling in our Scripture today. He told his churches, “*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*”² As I quoted C. S. Lewis last week, “Do not let us begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation.”³ In the first century, suffering was part of the package for Christians. The particular churches addressed in this letter were in Asia, what we now know as Turkey. Some scholars think they were suffering under the persecution of the Roman Emperor Domitian in the 80’s of the first century. Others doubt that the imperial persecution reached as far as Asia, so I Peter is probably taking about localized persecutions of Christians in these individual towns.

Either way, the early church was being harassed and persecuted for their beliefs and their way of life, and the letter says, “Don’t be surprised.” It’s part of the deal. Look who we worship. Jesus suffered persecution and prosecution and execution for his teaching. Do we really expect following him to be a smooth ride? Jesus said, “*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*”⁴

Today’s Scripture text makes the same point: “*Rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.*”⁵

We are blessed, I suppose, that we do not suffer widespread persecution for being Christians. Although a little persecution makes you take your faith a lot more seriously. But we do know about suffering in many forms, don’t we? The Scripture is telling us that our struggles can actually be reason to praise God. Our problems may be a sign of God’s blessing. The trials of faith are evidence of the presence of the Spirit. Think about that.

So the house of love is built in tough neighborhoods. It takes courage to build the house. The question today is, “How do we build our courage?” Peter has some suggestions.

Courage is built in **humility**. Our Scripture says, “*Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time.*”⁶ Courage demands humility because self-preservation cannot be a priority for the disciple of Jesus. It’s not about us. Our needs are not uppermost. We are humble servants of the Master, stewards in the household of the King. If we submit to him, then he promises to exalt us in due time—which is on his schedule, not ours.

Our high school and college graduations have been very different this year, kind of sad for the graduates, but also unique because they have had to be so creative. In a graduation speech at Dillard University in 2015, Denzel Washington told the graduates about his lesson in humility. The two-time Oscar winning actor was young then and just beginning to make it big. He went home and was bragging to his mother in her beauty shop: “Mom, did you think this was going to happen? That I'd be so big, and I'll be able to take care of everybody, and I can do this, and I can do that.” Lennis Washington reprimanded her son: “Oh, you did it all by yourself? I'll tell you what you can do by yourself: Go outside and get a mop and bucket and clean these windows—you can do that by yourself, superstar.” She said, “Boy, stop it right there. If you only knew how many people been praying for you.” Denzel told the graduates, “How many prayer groups she put together, how many prayer talks she gave, how many times she splashed me with holy water to save my sorry behind.” Then he told them the key to life: “Put God first in everything you do ... Everything that I have is by the grace of God, understand that. It's a gift.”⁷ Courage is grounded in humility.

Courage to live in the house of love is also built in **peace**. The next word in our Scripture text is one of my favorite verses: “*Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.*”⁸ Doesn’t that calm your heart just to hear those words? We can have courage to live in the midst of trouble because our spirit is at peace in God. He is the Rock that stands fast in the midst of the storm. He is the smell of Vicks Vapo-rub on your chest when you were a kid; didn’t you just know you were going to get better? He is the nightlight in the dark hallway full of monsters between your bedroom and the bathroom. He is our peace.

I recently read a letter from some missionaries who are serving in the Middle East. The Middle East is a tough neighborhood for any Christians. But they were serving in one of the locations where armed conflict was a fact of life. The sound of gunfire and explosions punctuated their daily activities.

In the midst of all the fear and despair, these missionaries saw a delightful reminder of God's care for us. There was a shepherd watching his flock near an area where guns were being fired sporadically. Every time the shots rang out the sheep scattered in fright. The shepherd then touched each of them with his staff and spoke calmly to them, and the sheep settled down immediately because they trusted the shepherd. Then another shot would sound, and the same routine happened again. Each time, the sheep needed the shepherd to orient them again and to reassure them they were safe.⁹

That sounds like a modern-day version of the 23rd Psalm: “*The Lord is my shepherd... His rod and his staff, they comfort me.*”¹⁰ That’s where we find peace—with the Shepherd of our souls. With peace in our hearts, we can live with courage.

Finally, courage is built up by **discipline**. We can be as humble and as peaceful as anyone, but if we have not put the practices of faithful living into place, we will still be weak disciples. We must practice discipline; we have to walk the walk of holiness.

There are two reasons discipline is necessary: One is that God calls us and expects us to be a holy people. We have run into this idea several times in I Peter: “*as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’*”¹¹ That’s what the walls of the house are made of, remember? We are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people—remember that?

The other reason we have to practice discipline is because there is an enemy at work to destroy us and our relationship with God: “*Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith.*”¹² The hungry lion is just outside the door, and if we don’t build up the walls of holiness, he will get in the house. We need the courage to resist evil.

World-famous entertainer Roy Horn died earlier this month from complications of the COVID-19 virus. Horn was half of the duo called Siegfried and Roy, and their act included both magic and work with big cats like tigers and lions. Roy's entertainment career ended on his 59th birthday, October 3, 2003. Siegfried and Roy were headliners in Las Vegas, and an audience of fifteen hundred people waited excitedly to see their incredible show.

About halfway into the performance, Horn appeared in the spotlight with a six-year-old white male tiger. It was a routine he had done hundreds of times. But for some unexplained reason, Horn slipped on stage. His loss of footing startled the 600-pound animal, who lunged at Horn. In self-defense, Roy attempted to beat the animal off with his hand-held microphone. The audience gasped as the tiger grabbed Horn by the neck, and dragged him offstage like a limp rag doll. Stage-crew members used fire extinguishers to distract the animal and free Roy. He was rushed to a local hospital, where he underwent emergency surgery for a spinal cord injury. He survived, but he spent months in recovery. He learned to walk again, but his performing days were over.

For 35 years, Roy Horn had successfully evaded the dangers of his trade. But an unexpected loss of balance nearly ended his life. A few nights after the tragic accident, Larry King interviewed Horn's partner, Siegfried Fischbach. As he attempted to explain what went wrong, two little words stood out as the primary cause: "Roy slipped."¹³

Living the life of discipleship is like dancing with a tiger. If you slip, the tiger has you by the throat. Discipline yourselves, keep alert, and have courage.

Don't be surprised by the ordeals of life, but build up your courage in humility, peace, and discipline. Then you will be ready to **claim the victory**. The writer of I Peter doesn't sugarcoat the pill or mince any words telling the truth about the struggle. But the victory is bigger than the valley; the triumph is greater than the trouble. We have a promise from God that if we remain steadfast in our faith, we will receive the resources to overcome our obstacles. We will share in God's ultimate victory over evil, sin, and death: *"After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all*

grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.” Then he adds a little shout of joy: “To him be the power forever and ever. Amen!”¹⁴

Isn't it great to know that we can depend on God to restore, support, strengthen, and establish us in the end? Doesn't that make you want to stand fast today? Doesn't that give you courage for the fight? Aren't you glad you're safe in the house of love today?

The day after Christmas in 2004, a record-setting earthquake struck off the west coast of Sumatra. It created a tsunami wave that eventually destroyed 227,000 lives in 14 countries and did \$15 billion worth of damage. Many cities and villages along the shoreline of the Bay of Bengal were obliterated. But the port city of Pondicherry, India, and its 300,000 inhabitants were spared. Just beyond the city limits, 600 people were killed by the devastating tsunami, but Pondicherry withstood the wave. Why were they protected?

The answer began 250 years ago when France colonized the city. The French built a massive stone seawall. Year after year, the French continued to strengthen the wall, piling huge boulders along a mile and a quarter of the seashore.

The French stopped building Pondicherry's seawall in 1957, but their work prepared the city for a disaster that would occur five decades into the future. Little did they know how important that wall would someday be. In 2004, when the tsunami hit, the seawall broke the wave, and the city was saved.¹⁵

We have a promise for the future today. We know that whatever trials we are now facing, whatever injuries we suffer for the cause of Christ, whatever obstacles the enemy throws in our path, we shall overcome. We may suffer for a while, but if we live with humility, peace, and discipline, then one day God will restore, support, strengthen and establish us in his Kingdom.

The house of love is in a tough neighborhood, but once you're inside, you are safe. You can withstand the waves. You can win the victory!

¹ <http://newsbot.msnbc.msn.com/> and <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=698324>, April 28, 2005.

² I Peter 4:12.

³ C.S.Lewis, "On Living In An Atomic Age"

<https://elynews.com/2020/03/24/living-in-the-age-of-coronavirus/>.

⁴ Matthew 5:11-12.

⁵ I Peter 4:13-14.

⁶ I Peter 5:6.

⁷ Michael W. Chapman, Denzel Washington to College Grads: 'Put God First,' CSNNEWS.com (5-11-15).

⁸ I Peter 5:7.

⁹ Greg Asimakoupoulos, *Preachingtoday.com*.

¹⁰ Psalm 23:1, 4.

¹¹ I Peter 1:15-16.

¹² I Peter 5:8-9.

¹³ *KOMO 4 News* (10-3-03) and *Associated Press* (10-10-03).

¹⁴ I Peter 5:10-11.

¹⁵ Chris Tomlinson, *Associated Press* (1-4-05), cited on *PreachingToday.com*.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2004_Indian_Ocean_earthquake_and_tsunami.