

**Rev. Nathan Detering**

**September 17, 2017**

**“Trembling Courage”**

*“Here is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.*

*Keep our hearts tender.*

*Keep our eyes soft.*

*Because this is what we are about:*

*We know there is no answer but to love one another.*

*We bear witness against unnecessary destruction.*

*We gather in community to practice being the person*

*The world is calling us to be.*

*We cannot do everything,*

*But we can do something, and that something is not nothing.*

*So forget your perfect offering.*

*There is a crack in everything*

*That is how the light gets in.”*

The arrival of September brings with it certain rituals – stocking up on wood

for the backyard fire pit to bring warmth on cool October nights,

Taking out the filter on the furnace and smacking it against the basement

wall in a cloud of built-up winter fluff,

Finding the forgotten backpacks before the first day of school, including,

yes, the lunch boxes that the kids swore they emptied in June (lovely),

And, yes, getting in the car with the two kids, Karyn staying home because,

Well, she never comes to where we’re going...

heading west on the Pike

And then south deep into the center of the state where the trees are rolling green, the politics a deeper hue of red, and...on the horizon, the top of the *Sky Screamer* thrill ride spinning its stomach churning circles, with the tips of *Mind Eraser* and *The Joker*, both roller coasters of death, just noticeable if you squint, and getting closer, The six flags of Six Flags flapping in the wind, which is worth noting because only in August did Six Flags in Texas remove the Confederate flag as one the flags the company flew in its parks in that state, which I note to the kids who now outrank and outflank me when it comes to deciding which rides we will do first, never mind that we are a threesome, which means someone, me, will need sit next to strangers and grip stranger's knees when the rides go 'ooh' and 'ahh' and 'oh no' and 'oh God.'

I'm trying to let these kind of politics – the politics of fun and who sits next to whom – be the primary politics of this day, But the summer of turmoil isn't far outside my eye or ear or heart, Which feels especially bruised, As we wait in the forever lines to get through the gates And I notice the family of five not too far ahead of us with matching t-shirts that proclaim 'Red Neck Nation #76,' the words encircled around A speeding image of a Nascar, all on the backdrop of Another Confederate flag, Which after Charlottesville I can't help but not see, Nor the family of color who is queuing up behind them,

Who seem to not pay the shirts any mind even though they surely do.

Part of my coming to terms with my being white, as in aware  
Of the privilege my skin color affords me,  
Means that I need to reckon with a culture that gives me the choice  
To notice or notice how these kind of symbols impact black and brown  
people, who of course, have no choice.

And part of my coming to terms with my being a religious person, and not  
just describing religion as a career choice,  
Means that I can't just satisfy myself that my life is some private trip,  
Filled with self-ies and solo spirit quests and comfortable sermons in the  
suburbs,  
But that instead my fate is caught up in your fate, and our fate is caught up  
In the fate of those people wearing confederate flags on their chests,  
And the fate of the black family behind them trying not to notice,  
Which, can we admit, is incredibly frustrating,  
Because it's so much easier just keeping to ourselves.

*'Feeling brave?' Emerson says, Feeling Courageous?'*

Which is a loaded question,  
Because would a courageous person have confronted that family  
Wearing the t-shirts,  
Cutting in line to ask with pointed finger: *you ever think about how seeing  
That flag says to other people besides you?*  
Such is the state of my spirit and these oh-so Un-United States that I  
Can confess I am not sure what to say or when or how

Without worrying if things will escalate.

But that isn't the only escalating I have to worry about,  
Because it's then that Em points up above our heads  
To the nuclear green ride (ride being a generous term)  
Called "Goliath,"  
Which you sit in, four abreast, feet dangling,  
And then it pulls you back like a sling shot, except it's not straight back,  
But instead back and then up...straight up, I mean straight up!  
Did I say STRAIGHT UP?!,  
A mile into the sky, your body at a right angle to the ground, face down,  
Pausing there for a purgatory lifetime,  
Before it releases you into the death arms of gravity and momentum  
Into twists and turns and not one but TWO loop-de-loops  
Before it grabs you again and pulls you up, STRAIGHT UP,  
Did I say STRAIGHT UP?!  
In the other direction, your face to the sky,  
Pausing there for more purgatory minutes  
Before it sends you back again through the spirals, spins, and hoops.

*"That's what we're going on first,"* say both of them,

*'You afraid? You afraid? You afraid? Because we're not...no way,  
Nope, uh-huh.'*

*Yeah,* I want to say, *that's just because you haven't lived long enough,*  
But I don't say that...because today I'm not to be cynical doom and gloom  
preacher dad – I mean, I've got to save something for the sermons in  
September, right?

And yet, this much is true: as you get older courage seems to come harder,  
Doesn't it?

*Courage*, first etymology of the year!, from the French meaning 'heart,'

And as you grow, and as your heart gets broken and mended,

Broken and mended,

And as you watch your heart walk outside your body in the form of

People you love who can't always protect,

And as you look out at the world and are struck, your heart is,

By all you cannot save,

Having heart, having courage is harder won, requires more practice,

More intention, more prayer, more commitment

Which, of course, makes it even more precious and prized,

When you manage to take a deep breath and...summon it.

But before I can summon mine,

We still have the line to contend with,

Which is more mob and blob than line

As we wait to get through the security check and metal detectors.

Since when did amusement parks need metal detectors?

What happened?

What is happening? What is going on???

I mean, I'm glad they're there, and they are checking for guns and wires

Coming out of purses and incendiary water bottles,

But sometimes I think we just have gotten too used to things

That should shock us...is my point,

That we've become too good at adapting and getting used to things

That should provoke us out of our normalcy, because some of what we're living through isn't normal.

But the crowd spooks me there in line, crowds have spooked me ever since August when, as I've told some of you, we visited Barcelona

A week before the terror attacks there, staying in a third-story walk-up

Right off the promenade,

All four of us and my in-laws walking up and down that promenade

Multiple times a day....

The news of the attack not long after we left provoking a heart full of what-ifs...

what if the driver chose to be there a week earlier,

what if we had visited a week later,

What if, what if, what if...?

I've heard of survivor guilt, but is survivor fear a thing?

Fear of the van that is now a weapon.

Fear of walking on the street.

Fear of riding the tube in London.

Fear of attending anti-hate protests in Charlottesville or Boston (bless you, Heather Heyer)

Fear of a president who can't seem to denounce the KKK without equivocation or much, if any, consequence.

Fear of bars that got have gotten set so low.

Fear of the division and where it will lead.

Fear of all we cannot save, and especially all that we can,

Given our relative privilege, if only we get outraged enough

To disturb our status quo.

I know what I need and you need is courage.

But am I the only one who is trembling?

*‘Don’t worry, dad, you can hold our hands...’*

The kids say as we wend our way to the last three open seats

On “Goliath,”

The last in the last row.

Seat belt over my lap, harness down over my chest,

Both hands of my children whose hands I held when they were first born,

It occurs to me how much faith we put into each other.

Faith in the engineer who designed this ride.

Faith in the person who built the machine that fabricated the clasps on the belt.

Faith in the person, whatever their politics, who threaded the bolts

On the seat and tightened them to the correct torque spec.

Faith in the pimpled teen-age operator who just synched my belt.

Faith in the hands of my children on either side of me

As the floor evaporates underneath our feet and we are pulled

Back in the slingshot of Goliath, back and then straight up,

STRAIGHT UP, did I say STRAIGHT UP?!

A mile into the air...*oh my God!!!*

Me trembling, fearful, *what if? What if? What if?*

And the kids on other side saying *‘we got you, we got you,*

*It’s ok...’*

And it occurs to me: *Can courage be contagious? Can we get heart from others when our heart isn’t enough?*

*Can I tremble and have courage at the same time?*

Friends, I have heard it said that the time we are all living in together

Is a “VUCA” world.

What is VUCA?

It means we are living in a world of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity.

Or as a recent Harvard Business Review article called it in shorthand:

*“Hey, it’s crazy out there.”*

And when it is crazy ‘out there,’

It’s tempting to hunker down, sit on the bench, say ‘you kids go ahead’

And cover up our fear by escaping into the familiar and the safe

And the normative and the status quo.

It is, after all, so much easier keeping to ourselves.

Except that ease and easier isn’t what we want, in the end,

Or what the these VUCA times are asking of us.

So, here at the end a request:

Will you help me?

Because despite your projections to the contrary,

I am sometimes overcome with fear and

I doubt I have the heart, the courage, to get up off the bench

And ride these scary times.

Will you help me?

Because I know sometimes you are overcome with fear

And I know you doubt you have the heart, the courage,

To get up off the bend and ride these scary times.

Can we hold each other’s hands?

Can we hold each other's hands? (go down)

Can we help each other have heart?

Can we help each other not flee, or distract ourselves

Or flee into the comfortable,

Knowing that we can sit together in the eye of our fear,

Straight up, STRAIGHT UP!

And know we've got each other as the ride releases us

Into the twists and turns together,

And that we're in this until we've reached the other side?

Let us say Amen.

And amen.

And again, with courage: Amen.