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Community of Hope  
Madison, WI  
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*Justice and courage*  
-Wisdom 8

You, dear friends, are the road salt of the earth. The healthy and safety of the community is in your hands. On this snowy morning, what if, instead of salt, the road crew was putting down something useless? In our lesson for today, Jesus is challenging us to face our own uselessness to his cause of justice. The message is too complex for just one analogy, so he used two – salt and light.

I couldn't remember how far the unaided human eye could see a single lit candle. Siri says over a mile and a half; 1.7 to be exact. Jesus says, but if you put a lid over it, no one can see it. It is useless. Pretty clear. It is also clear from our text that Jesus is not talking about candles, he is talking about us being useless.

While we in Wisconsin understand the value of road salt, salt meant something different to those listening to Jesus, something even more important. They used salt as a food preservative, so food could be safely stored and would be good when they needed it. Jesus begins by saying to his listeners that they are the salt of the earth. They played a vital role in the health of his work for justice, just like salt is vital to the health of the body. The work of justice is not in the hands of a distant god. It is in our hands.

Then Jesus says to us that we are at risk of becoming useless, just like salt that has lost its salty taste. Useless. His listeners knew that salt does not lose its saltiness, unlike herbs and spices, who lose the strength of their flavor over time. But they knew

what he meant by salt losing its saltiness because they had experienced it. They would buy a container of salt, and it tasted salty. Then, over time, as they got farther down in the container, it might not taste like salt anymore. Because it wasn't salt. It was useless, and they would throw it out. Unscrupulous salt merchants would add filler to the salt, like forms of sand that looked like salt, to the salt. Over time, the filler would settle down to the bottom of the container. When they really needed salt, they might just have sand. Useless.

Is Jesus right? Are we at risk of becoming useless? Useless for what? I am suggesting, useless to his cause, the cause of the oppressed, the poor, those suffering injustice. Obviously we can become useless that way. What is inside us that is essential to our work for justice can become diluted. When we are needed, we might fail. Jesus' analogy also carries the implication that we are at risk of being fooled into becoming weakened.

The reading from Corinthians addressed one source of becoming diluted, and that is the ideas and values that surround us that favor self-interest, power and wealth. . It contrasts that with what it calls the True Wisdom of God. Think of the moral heroes in the past weeks who could have just saved themselves and their careers but didn't. Some call this being normed by the Gospel rather than being normed by society, which has our ear throughout our day, every day. Being normed by time-honored values takes diligence, resolve, time and energy. We can feel alone in even trying to do so. It can lead to the stressful situation of being the canary in the coal mine; we may sense a problem when others do not. Then we find out, are we salt, or are we sand? Do we let our values speak, or put a lid on them and be safe? There are risks from speaking up and sounding the alarm. The mildest is that we will be invalidated by others, which hurts. Why invalidated? Because people want to believe that if they see nothing wrong, there is nothing wrong, instead of realizing that some people have better moral awareness than others.

The convictions that encourage us to do what is right also convict us when we don't. Abigail Disney inherited a fortune but is disturbed by the wealth gap in our society. She says the only reason she didn't give her fortune away as some others have done is "I was chicken. I wish I had more courage." So do some Boeing employees,

who have expressed how sick they feel from participating in the coverup about Boeing's unsafe aircraft. One measure of our courage is what we stand to lose.

While the salt story points to weakness, the Psalms reading for today points to the strength involved in living lives of justice. That strength is courage. In speaking of those who conduct their affairs with justice, it says "Their hearts are firm; their hearts are steady; they will not be afraid." These are qualities of the heart. The word courage is based on the root for heart. When we say someone has lost heart, we mean that they have lost courage. Courage is a quality that supports social justice work that is stronger and more reliable than other qualities, such as hope. Hope is conditional; courage is not.

The story is told of a prisoner at Auschwitz who was old and very ill but somehow kept going. Someone asked her how she did it. She said she had heard the American forces would free them by Christmas. When Christmas came and went, she died. Hope had sustained her, but it ultimately failed her. Hers was death from despair. Many in our society today are actually dying of despair.

Courage is different. Winston Churchill said that "courage is rightly considered the foremost of the virtues, for upon it, all others depend." Similarly, C.S Lewis observed that "Courage is not just one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point." At the testing point, are we salt or are we sand? One thing that stands out about the life of Jesus is his courage. While worldly wisdom says save yourself, the True Wisdom of God says act on behalf of what is right.

It is odd, then, that Christianity puts so little emphasis on courage while instead placing faith and hope at the center. Officially, it sees hope as a sign of faith. If one is without hope, they must be without faith, the orthodox reasoning goes. Hopelessness, then, is seen as a spiritual defect. This emphasis on hope, can leave us, and our religious leaders, seeing hope as essential when facing dark uncertainty. This belief is rampant. Not so, the writer of the book of Mark, who closed the story of Jesus with the uncertainty of the empty tomb. Others offer hope as the answer to fear, when only courage can reliably be stronger than fear. The church's investment in hope is reflected in the naming of churches. Hundreds if not thousands of churches in our country are

named Hope, as ours is. At Madison Christian Community, the names of our congregations emphasize hoping and waiting: Community of Hope and Advent, which is a season of waiting. Hoping and waiting. Our names inadvertently promote passivity.

In contrast, Siri, my research assistant, could only find 2 churches named Courage. Courage Church in Detroit and The Courageous Church in Springfield, Missouri. Why so little emphasis on courage?

Some historians believe that Christianity came to promote hoping and waiting after it became affiliated with the political power of Emperor Constantine. For the power structure to offer hope actually solidifies its power by implying that our wellbeing is in their hands, not in our own. Salvation was in the hands of the church. With its emphasis on hope, the church colludes with dominant society today. Both politicians and religious leaders appeal to hope. The ones best able to give us hope are the ones who get elected. But hope keeps control in the hands of those in power. Miguel A. De La Torre at the Iliff School of Theology notes that it is a theology of privilege that links faith with hope. The idea that there is always hope is a view available only to survivors. Hope is also a luxury too often created on the backs of others, stripping them of hope. One group's Promised Land is another's brutal loss of their homeland. This is also a current situation.

In contrast, courage without hope spells danger to those in power. Such people can be uniquely fearless. Take the people who hid the Jews from the Nazis. The interviews show they were not motivated by hope; they were motivated by the courage of their convictions. They acted from heart. Many people seeking justice around the world show great courage, such as in fleeing their homelands to escape dire situations. Or, they take to the streets to pressure repressive regimes, risking their lives. People act from courage when they escape from abusive relationships of any kind and expose the abusers. They risk further harm. Whistle blowers and others who act from the integrity of their convictions risk losing their jobs, as we have seen just again in the past few days. These people are neither hoping nor waiting. They are acting from the courage of their convictions. When there is no hope, courage is the only thing left to keep them going. Courage is at the bottom of their salt containers, not just on the top

What does courage related to injustice have to do with our lives? I read an article on the despair liberals are feeling in the US, the lack of hope for justice and the environment and so on given the priorities and values of corporations and the current administration. The author interviewed a woman from the Middle East for her perspective. She said, those despairing Americans have lived under one of the best governments ever known, and now, when things turn against them, they give in to despair. Most people in the world, she said, have to deal with government corruption for a very long time.

Many Americans alive today don't know courage the way others in the world do because we haven't had to be courageous. There are exceptions, of course, but for most of us who have prospered here, hope has been realistic. Things have been tilted in our favor. But for many, things are tilted against them. We aren't practiced in how to deal with realistic hopelessness. But those suffering injustice cannot afford for us to give in to the luxury of despair. The world needs us to become more courageous, more guided by our convictions. We can do so by drawing from the courage of others. There is a lot of courage happening in the world today. Think of the courage of Li Wenliang, the whistleblower in China who made the coronavirus outbreak public? He knew the risk that he took, as did those who testified truthfully in congressional hearings about President Trump. Some had courage while others saved themselves.

Some courage, like these examples, comes in response to events that happen to us. We are forced to decide, like some of us were when drafted to fight a war we believed was wrong. We had to decide. Sometimes we don't need to face up, like when in my career I became aware of the unethical behavior of colleagues. If I had avoided confronting them, no one would have known to fault me, and I would not have incurred their wrath.

Most of the injustice we encounter does not require us to decide. We can get away with avoiding them. Acting for justice seems optional. For many years I avoided the fact that I have profited from the ill-gotten gains of my portion of the land wealth my grandparents gained from the homesteading of native people's hunting grounds in North Dakota. To do something about that now, all I risk is some ridicule for my White liberal guilt.

Becoming aware of the injustices we could do something about takes time, energy and the willingness to encounter distress. So we are at risk of avoiding awareness of them. It is important, in our self-evaluation, to realize that all acts of kindness are not acts of justice. We can help individuals without addressing the systems that harm them. So I can think I am doing more for justice than I actually am. I need to challenge myself. I wonder, if I had the courage, what would I be doing that I am not doing? If nothing comes to mind, how do I find out? If you had the courage, what would you be doing that you are not. If we as Community of Hope and Madison Christian Community had the courage, what would we be doing that we are not.

Yes, we are doing a lot; it is part of our identity as MCC, but what are we avoiding? How is inadequate courage reducing our usefulness? When are we not showing our values due to timidity? How much of our container is sand and not the salt of courage? May we have the courage to find out. Amen

## **Pastoral Prayer**

We are grateful for the awareness for the needs of others so we can participate in their wellbeing – those in our community here, those in our community outside the awareness of our social circles, and those in distant lands. We pray for greater awareness. We pray for the willingness to not hide our needs and concerns from others who would love to participate in our wellbeing.

May we be motivated by the understanding that we are as important to the work of God's justice as salt and light are important to human life on this earth. But we are at risk of becoming useless to that work, as salt is useless that is contaminated, and light is useless that is hidden. We pray for the capacity to stay true to what is essential for justice for others and for ourselves, even when it calls for us to do things we have never done before. May we have courage. On behalf of justice, may we be willing to risk losing what gives us comfort, losing what gives us our sense of security, losing what we believe we cannot do without. My we follow Jesus. May we connect with his eye for injustice, seeing what others around us do not see. May we be willing to be the canary in the coal mine and speak to what weakens the human spirit. May we have courage.