

BE COURAGEOUS

PASTOR CHARLIE BERTHOUD

ACTS 7:51-60

LOVE

God
Neighbor
Enemy

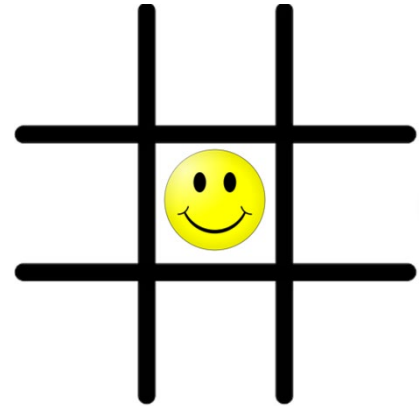
Sunday, March 22, 2026

“Be Courageous” | Acts 7:51-60 | Pastor Charlie Berthoud

So, have you been playing any tic tac toe month?

During Lent our focus is on the teaching of Jesus, who call us to love God, neighbor, and enemy.

Four weeks ago, at the beginning of this holy season, I invited everyone to use a tic tac toe board to think about eight neighbors, and possibly a few enemies. I encouraged you to write down some names and pray for them and look for opportunities to share God’s love. So, I hope the tic tac toe is going well.



Loving neighbors and enemies sometimes involves kindness, compassion, and service as we have reflected on in the past few weeks.

Today, we take a different angle, recognizing how sometimes being loving means being courageous.



Our primary example of course is Jesus, who courageously continued to proclaim the kingdom of God, defying the power of King Herod and the religious establishment, which led to his death on a cross.

We are just a week away from Holy Week, when we remember how Jesus entered Jerusalem, courageously facing the political and religious leaders, in the name of love.

Jesus called his followers to do what he had done: love God, neighbor, and enemies in concrete and authentic ways, which often meant particular focus on people who were forgotten, ignored, and despised.

Stephen was an early follower of Jesus and he became a leader in the early church. We learn about him in Acts 6-7 and that’s where our reading is from today.

Just like Jesus, Stephen was involved with caring for the people who were forgotten, ignored, and despised. And just like with Jesus, this apparently got him into trouble with the religious authorities, who seemed to value their traditions more than loving all of their neighbors. They questioned Stephen’s beliefs, and Stephen responds with a lengthy proclamation in chapter 7, courageously defying the hypocrisy and arrogance of the religious leaders.

But his words are not enough, and he is stoned to death. And that's our reading for today. It's not a happy topic, but it's appropriate for this season, with the echoes between Stephen and Jesus, most notably when Stephen asks God to forgive those who were killing him, just as Jesus called from the cross: "Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing." What an example of loving one's enemies.

Our reading is the conclusion of Stephen's speech and the response of the authorities. His frustration with the religious leaders is clear. Listen for God's word.

⁵¹ "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. ⁵³ You are the ones who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it."

⁵⁴ When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. ⁵⁵ But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" ⁵⁷ But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸ Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him, and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

Stephen is the first of many Christians who were persecuted and killed for trying to follow the teaching of Jesus and to make God's love real in the world.


The word for someone who dies for their faith is martyr. And the root word for martyr is the same as the word for witness.

Jesus told his disciples to be witnesses, to reflect and continue what he began, sharing God's love and making it real. Sometimes being a witness to God's love requires courage.

Sadly, since the Stephen, there have been many Christian witnesses since who have been killed. One of the best known to us would be Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who was assassinated on April 4, 1968, because of his advocacy for civil rights and economic justice.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.


- Human rights advocate
- Denounced racism and poverty
- Murdered April 4, 1968



LOVE God Neighbor Enemy

**Guatemalan Bishop
Juan Jose Gerardi**

- Human rights advocate
- Denounced massacres of indigenous people
- Murdered April 26, 1998



LOVE God Neighbor Enemy

A witness that is known in Guatemala is Bishop Juan Jose Gerardi, who spoke out against the atrocities of the military in the 1980s, with particular concern for violence toward indigenous people. He led a major investigation in human rights abuses and in 1998, his team published a report called *Nunca Más*, never again.

Two days later he was assassinated.

Martin Luther King and Bishop Gerardi and countless others had **courage** to live out their faith, knowing the risk. They heard when Jesus said:

“If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? (Matthew 16:24-26)

They knew that Jesus also said:

Jesus said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:12-13)

And they knew that the first letter of John says:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth. (1 John 3:16-18)

Our context is different than the early church, or the civil rights struggle of the 1960s, or post-war Guatemala in the 1990s. I hope to God that no one here ever has to come close to giving up their literal life to serve someone else or in the service of the Kingdom of God.

While our lives may not be in imminent danger, we still are called to be courageous, and I’d like to suggest three ways we could be courageous in our world today:

Courage to speak up

This might be in a family relationship, or with a neighbor or co-worker, or with an elected official. Having courage to speak up doesn’t mean being annoying and arrogant and loud, but it does mean being clear and sharing one’s convictions.

As the apostle Paul says, we are called to speak the truth with love.

Courage to change your mind

At the same time, we need to listen to each other and sometimes that means we learn new things and realize that we were wrong. Every Sunday, we offer a prayer of confession, asking God to forgive us and set us straight. In this season of Lent in particular, we think about repentance, which isn’t simply about feeling bad; it’s more about changing one’s direction or changing one’s mind.

Courage to trust God

One of the first Bible verses I learned as a teen when I really started taking faith seriously comes from Proverbs 3:5-6:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.

That means knowing the promise that God our good shepherd is with us, even in the valley of the shadow of death, as we hear in the 23rd psalm.

That means knowing the promise of Jesus, who told his followers “I am with you always until the end of the age” at the conclusion of Matthew’s gospel.

And while we yearn to be courageous and we think about being brave in the face of danger, it’s important to remember that most of our lives are lived in mundane day to day realities.

Once upon a time, a family heard a sermon about being courageous, and at dinner that night, one of the kids said: “I would definitely run into a burning building to save someone or jump on a hand grenade to save my friends.” His father responded, “That’s great, but can you also put your dishes in the dishwasher, make your bed, and be nice to your little sister?”

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To help us be courageous, we can sing and we can pray. I wrote about this in our weekly CONNECTIONS email on Friday, mentioning three of the songs we’re singing today.

Singing and praying are good ways to become more courageous.

And thanks to a Covenant member, I thought of another way to be courageous: with our clothes.

Last week, Jennifer Morgan stopped at our house, just back from her civil rights pilgrimage to Alabama, hosted by a nearby church. While she was there she was nice enough to give me a John Lewis t-shirt.



John Lewis was a heroic leader in the civil rights movement who became a member of Congress. He became famous for his call for people to get in “good trouble,” a phrase he echoed through his career.

Shortly before his death, he was on the Edmund Pettis Bridge, site of the infamous Bloody Sunday attack in 1965. There, Lewis called citizens to “Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America.”

This spring and summer when I wear this shirt, I think I'm going to feel a little more courageous. Maybe you have a shirt or a hat or a button or a bracelet or some shoes that help you feel more courageous.

The Bible does encourage us to dress wisely, for courageous and faithful living.

In Ephesians 6, Paul calls us to put on the full armor of God:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power; **put on the whole armor of God**, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, for our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness....

And so, we put on the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the sandals of peace, the shield of faith, helmet of salvation, sword of the Spirit.

Along with that defensive posture, the Bible gives us more wardrobe suggestions. In Colossians 3, we're called to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, and love.

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.....Above all, **clothe yourselves with love**, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

So tomorrow morning, as you get dressed, while you might not have a John Lewis t-shirt, I encourage you to put on the armor of God, to protect you from whatever challenges come your way. And I encourage you to clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, and love.

And I encourage you to pray for courage, wisdom, and strength, for whatever comes your way.

Let us pray...