

Rhythms Week 8

Cultivating the Virtue of Courage Through the Practice of Advocacy

What makes for a beautiful, compelling life? What characterizes and cultivates such a life? ***Rhythms of Renewal**** is a program designed to help us grow in the virtues that characterize a beautiful and compelling human life by helping us engage in practices that cultivate such a life. What makes for a beautiful, compelling life? This week, we will seek to grow in the virtue of Courage by engaging the practice of Advocacy.

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Courage is among the most universally admired virtues across cultures and world history. The heroes of our favorite stories and legends are often exemplars of courage who inspire us to overcome our fears and do what is right, good, loving, and just. Yet, philosopher Rebecca Konyuk DeYoung argues that, when we take Jesus as our exemplar of courage and seek to understand the virtue through his character, we discover a particularly Christian courage that is distinct from the classical “heroic warrior” courage we have come to know through myths and movies. Drawing upon the thought of medieval theologian St. Thomas Aquinas, DeYoung describes a kind of Christian courage that “affirms some things about conventional views of the virtue” yet “also challenges them and provides a warning about trusting human power to conquer evil, fear, and death.”[1] This Christian virtue of courage, DeYoung shows, is closely related to both fear and love, and may be best understood as the virtue that emerges when our rightly ordered love of what is good enables us to pursue what is good in the face of our fear of danger. “To be a virtue, courage must point beyond itself to love as its source and to love’s end as its goal.”[2]

DeYoung also makes the connection between our formation as a people of courage and the practices that foster such growth. As she considers the necessity of our keeping in mind a “big picture” view of the common good as we decide how to act in any given situation, DeYoung writes: “An important part of formation in virtue, a life of cultivating Christlike character, is engaging in the sort of practices and disciplines that gradually align our initial reactions to accord more and more with this big-picture view of our good. Rather than letting fears interfere with our pursuit of what we love, then, we can with courage discipline them enough to enable that pursuit, or even see the good more clearly and pursue it more wholeheartedly and faithfully.”[3]

Advocacy is a practice that cultivates courage because it trains our actions and desires toward a love of neighbor and a vision for human flourishing that is bigger than ourselves. Advocacy involves our entering into solidarity with others who are in vulnerable, fearful

situations and letting love, not fear, drive our actions. Because advocacy is about using one's own voice or agency on behalf of someone else who, for whatever reason, lacks relative power in a given situation, the practice of advocacy often will involve our willful decision to leave the comfort and (perceived) security of our own non-involvement in order to enter a conflict as an ally to a person or group who is suffering. In other words, the practice of advocacy cultivates courage both by calling forth the courage we need to take up the practice in the first place and by making habitual the kinds of thoughts and actions that characterize a person of courage.

Jesus models for us both the virtue of courage and the practice of advocacy in his life of self-sacrificial love toward God and neighbor. From the beginning, we see Jesus leveraging his privilege and power, not to benefit himself but to bless others (Philippians 2:5-8). In both his public ministry and private conversations, we see Jesus speaking truth to power and advocating for the poor, marginalized, and oppressed (Luke 4:14-29; 18 & 19). In his suffering and death, we see Jesus practice what he himself preached: "No greater love has anyone than this but to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Instead of speaking in self-defense before Pontius Pilate, Jesus remained silent unto his own death, so that he would later be able to speak on our behalf as our "great high priest" (Hebrews 4:14) who is also our "advocate with the Father" (1 John 2:1). And of course, Jesus calls his disciples to imitate him in this courageous way of life: "Deny yourselves, take up your cross, and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Jesus also empowers his disciples for this courageous calling by giving his Holy Spirit, whom he describes as our "paraclete" or advocate in John 14:16.

As Bethany Hanke Hoang and Kristen Deede Johnson helpfully remind us, "Remember: just as we have sometimes underestimated God's determination to rescue others from lives of oppression, we have also underestimated God's determination to rescue us from lives of perceived comfort and safety so that we can be led into lives of courageous trust and hope in God's kingdom." [4]

A note of encouragement: Not ready to move on? That is okay! Continue practicing last week's rhythm. If you're ready, read on. As always, do not feel the pressure to read everything or implement everything at once. Take your time with this rhythm over the week. Choose one or two questions to dwell on at a time. Choose one or two practices to implement at a time. Start where you are and let the Holy Spirit build your rhythms slowly. The hope is grow to be deep people over time, not all at once.

1. REFLECT. Consider these questions on your own or with a prayer partner/group :

- What image comes to mind when you think of courage? How does your image of courage compare to the courage of Jesus Christ?
- How are courage and love connected?

- How are courage and advocacy connected?
- Recall an experience when someone advocated for you?
- What does it look like to advocate for others?

2. UNMASK THE CORE LIE: Recognize the power of a core lie we often believe: *“Loving my neighbor is not worth the cost to me.”*

One obstacle to our becoming a people of courage through the practice of advocacy is our believing this core lie: “Loving my neighbor is not worth the cost to me.” This lie gives fear the upper hand as it prioritizes fear-driven, self-oriented self-advocacy (e.g. defensiveness, rationalization, denial of or ignoring others’ needs, etc.) over love-driven, other-oriented advocacy for those in need. So often, we fail to act in love toward others in need because we are afraid of what it may cost us - comfort, ease, our reputation, money, social status, etc. When we lose sight of God’s loving, sufficient advocacy for us in Jesus, we begin to fall for the lie that the way of life and well-being is the way of self-protection and self-promotion rather than the way of self-sacrificial love. Thus, we often opt out of speaking and acting on behalf of others courageously, choosing instead to follow our fears. Read the anti-Psalm[7] below as a way to reflect on this.

Anti-Psalm 56

You are not gracious, O God. You don’t care that people trample me.
 You won’t protect me; I must protect myself.
 When I am afraid, I have to look out for myself.
 There is no one else I can trust.
 No one else will advocate for me.
 No one else will vindicate me.
 No one else will seek justice on my behalf.
 When others seek to do me harm,
 speak ill of me, or stir up strife,
 it’s up to me to survive -
 “fight, flight, or freeze” will be my strategy.
 Maybe I will lash out in rage.
 Maybe I will tear you down with my words
 and trash your reputation, so you can’t tarnish mine.
 Maybe I will keep silent,
 just hoping it all goes away.
 However I go about it, one thing is for sure -
 I will leverage what I’ve got to protect myself,
 and I definitely won’t be looking out for you.
 For no one else keeps count of my tossings
 or puts my tears in a bottle.
 There’s no one for me to call when I need an ally,
 no one powerful who can send my enemies packing.

This I know - I must look out for myself.
The world is a scary place,
and survivors are those who learn to listen to their fears.
I know my baptismal vows -
to renounce evil, to trust and follow Jesus,
to use my gifts and resources to participate
in the worship, life, and mission of the church
as we seek God's kingdom together -
but I didn't understand then how costly that would be.
I didn't realize how costly love would be
and how risky it would feel to entrust my life to another -
to remain silent instead of speaking in self-defense
and to use my voice to promote others instead of myself;
to risk my reputation and status to solve someone else's problem;
to forfeit my comfort in order to join in another's suffering.
It's just too much to ask of me right now.
No one ever did that for me.
It's not like anyone else is going to deliver me from death.
So I'm just going to sit out and stand down.
I'm going to steer clear of conflict as much as possible.
And I'm going to look out for myself,
live by the light of my own eyes.
Not exactly heroic, I know,
but I don't really want to be a hero.
I just want to be comfortable.

Notice the core lie at work in your life. Where in your life do you notice yourself believing the lie: "Loving my neighbor is not worth the cost to me." If that doesn't feel like your core lie, what do you think it might be? Ask the Spirit to give you wisdom. Become curious about your believing the core lie. What do you feel when you are believing this? What thoughts or behaviors accompany or follow this belief?

3. REMEMBER THE CORE TRUTH. "Loving your neighbor is absolutely worth the cost to you, as hard as that may be to believe in any given situation. The truth is that Jesus, your courageous advocate, has embraced the cost of loving you, and in doing so, has secured your well-being forever in the kingdom of God. Now, Jesus calls you to imitate him in the courageous, costly work of loving others in and with him, for the sake of sharing Christ's advocacy with the world. In other words, Jesus calls you to "find your life in losing it" (Matthew 16:25) as you follow him courageously in the way of love.

Psalm 56

Be gracious to me, O God, for people trample on me;
all day long foes oppress me;
my enemies trample on me all day long,

for many fight against me.
O Most High, when I am afraid,
I put my trust in you.
In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust;
I am not afraid; what can flesh do to me?
All day long they seek to injure my cause;
all their thoughts are against me for evil.
They stir up strife, they lurk, they watch my steps.
As they hoped to have my life,
so repay them for their crime;
in wrath cast down the peoples, O God!
You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle.
Are they not in your record?
Then my enemies will retreat in the day when I call.
This I know, that God is for me.
In God, whose word I praise,
in the Lord, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I am not afraid.
What can a mere mortal do to me?
My vows to you I must perform, O God;
I will render thank offerings to you.
For you have delivered my soul from death,
and my feet from falling,
so that I may walk before God in the light of life.

Become curious about believing the core truth. What do you feel when you are believing the truth instead of the lie? What thoughts or behaviors accompany or follow this belief?

4. FOOD FOR INSPIRATION & IMITATION. Look at how Jesus exemplifies courage and advocacy in Matthew 21:10-17:

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers." The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became angry and said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself'?" He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

5. GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS. Consider these questions on your own, with your City Group, or a prayer partner.

- When you think about becoming the person you long to be, what do the virtue of courage and the practice of advocacy have to do with your becoming that person?
- How do you think practicing advocacy might help you become a better friend, neighbor, family member, ally, spouse, parent, roommate, or co-worker?
- Who in your life (or in the public sphere) today do you see as a model of what it looks like to be a good advocate for others? What about their advocacy do you find compelling?
- Who in your life (family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, etc.) might need your advocacy right now?
- What do you find inspiring about Jesus' life of courage and advocacy, and what's one way that you can imitate Jesus's practice of speaking on behalf of others?
- In light of this conversation, where in your life do you need God's help right now?

6. MICROPRACTICES FOR THE WEEK.

"Arrow Prayers" — We'll offer some of these each week. The title comes from Sally Lloyd Jones, whose "Jesus Storybook Bible" many of us have loved and used. The idea is that prayer doesn't have to be complex to be meaningful and real. Here are some "arrow prayers" for this week's practice:

- God, give me courage to do what is right, no matter the cost.
- Father, help me to speak the truth in love, especially when that's scary.
- Jesus, my advocate, help me advocate with you for others in need.
- Spirit of love and power, help me overcome my fears.

Habit Stacking — Habit-stacking is the practice of adding a new habit onto something you already do habitually (e.g. brushing your teeth, doing the dishes, or walking to work), a term we learned from James Clear, Atomic Habits. Some ideas:

- As you walk or drive to work, think about all the people in your life who might benefit from your speaking on their behalf - a family member who is marginalized, a co-worker who is unfairly treated or undercompensated, a friend or neighbor who others are gossiping about, someone whose political views have alienated them from you or others you know, etc. Take the time to pray for opportunities and courage to speak on their behalf or show up in support.
- As you scroll through your social media newsfeed, take time to notice if any of your friends or followers are being unfairly treated (or treating anyone unfairly). Consider speaking on behalf of the mistreated in a peacemaking, supportive way.
- At the dinner table, talk about what it means to advocate for others and who in your lives might benefit from your speaking on their behalf. Talk about how Jesus might speak in those situations and how you might imitate Jesus as an advocate this week.

Micro-Practices of Prayer in Community & Mission

- Want to be an advocate for racial justice but don't know where to start? A good place to start is [with these resources](#) from Grace Pasadena. Learn to pray; learn the history; learn the issues of your community.
- Want to grow in courage through the practice of advocacy? Think of a friend, neighbor, co-worker, or family member who could benefit from your support, and then speak up on their behalf.
- Who in your life is suffering silently and often overlooked? Use your voice to invite your community to remember, pray for, and help them.

Sources Cited

[1] Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, "Courage," Pages 145-166 in Michael W. Austin and R. Douglas Geivett, eds., *Being Good: Christian Virtues for Everyday Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 146.

[2] DeYoung, 155.

[3] DeYoung, 149.

[4] *The Justice Calling: Where Passion Meets Perseverance* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2106), 159.

[5] We got the "anti-Psalm" idea from Dr. David Powlison, "Anti-Psalm 23," which we use as a model for exploring the Psalms devotionally as windows into both our own hearts and the mercy of God.