Courage Matters  
Acts 2:14  

A Sermon Delivered  
By  
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Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord our Strength and Redeemer, Amen.

Our Scripture this morning, taken from the Book of Acts, describes for us what is perhaps the single most important event in the birth of the Christian Church. The event is what we know as Pentecost and marks the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus 50 days after His resurrection. Not only was this event dramatic, but it was a pivotal moment in the history of how humanity experienced God. Up until this point, the great spiritual experiences, the defining moments of the power and presence of God were largely reserved for the “spiritual giants” if you will – men and women especially called to lead God’s people to greater faithfulness. We think of Abram hearing God’s call under the starry sky, Moses at the burning bush, Jacob wrestling with the Angel, Isaiah overwhelmed by the vision of God in the temple, Deborah, Elijah, Samson, David...we could name many more. The point is, for millennia, the most defining experiences of the indwelling power of God were known by only a few who would then go and inspire God’s people. Well Pentecost changed all of that. The day had finally dawned where God would pour out His Spirit on all flesh – young and old, male and female, slave and free – all who believed in Christ would now be filled with the Spirit of God.

We see this vividly in the experience of Peter, the central figure in our story this morning. Here is Peter, an ordinary fisherman by trade, rough around the edges, who often lacked discretion. Yet when commissioned by God and filled with the Holy Spirit, he rises up to preach one of the most powerful sermons ever given. “Taking his stand,” we read, “Peter raised his voice” and declared the word of God unto them.” It was stunning for Peter to speak this way, the man who only weeks earlier had denied Jesus. But Peter was a changed man. The Spirit of God that he’d witnessed for three years in the Person of Jesus, had been given to him and all who believed; and the result was a power and a conviction and an authority that he’d never known before. Christ was literally speaking through Peter. And the fruit of Peter’s preaching was immediate! If we had read just a few passages further in our passage from Acts, we would’ve seen that upon hearing Peter preach, the multitudes were “pierced to the quick,” and cried out “what shall we do?” Peter answers, “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” More than 3,000 souls were added to the Kingdom of God that day.

But the story doesn’t end here. Just a few days later (Acts 4), Peter preaches a second sermon; and this time, 5,000 people come to Christ. And a tremendous season of growth follows, where the sick and lame
are being healed, believers are meeting together in each other’s homes - praising God and praying and studying the Scriptures and breaking bread...Pentecost fire has come. But then comes trial. So undeniable are the changes going on in people’s lives, so fervent is the faith of the growing church, that a report of these things is forwarded up the chain-of-command to the ruling religious body known as the Sanhedrin. And they’re not happy. In Acts 4, beginning with verse 18, we read, “And summoning Peter and John, the religious leaders command them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.” To which Peter and John reply, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge, for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.” The Sanhedrin throw them out and warn them to stop what they’re doing. When Peter and John report back to the rest of the believers about the events they’d gone through, the believers all began glorifying God, and praying that God would enable them to continue to speak the word of God with confidence. And after they prayed, we’re told in Acts 4:31 that “the place where they were gathered was shaken and they were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.”

There is so much about which this story speaks, and so much we could say, especially on a day like this. But when I think about the Class of 2013 and about the threshold upon which you now stand, and the world of decisions and consequences into which you are about to enter, I believe that today, God would have us speak of boldness and courage. As we see in the examples of Peter and John, courage is one of the distinguishing marks of the Holy Spirit, and it’s what will be demanded of you as you step out into the calling that God has placed upon your lives.

Winston Churchill said “courage is the first of [all] human qualities...because it guarantees all the others.” And I think we all would agree with that. And yet courage has become a contested virtue in our day, suffering what some would all an identity crisis. Senator John McCain, Naval Academy Class of ’58, wrote an excellent book on courage that I would highly recommend to you. It’s called, Why Courage Matters. The most insightful point Senator McCain makes is the claim that courage as a virtue has been diluted or “defined down” in our day. He points out how we’ve come to attribute courage to all manner of actions that may be commendable but hardly compare to the conscious self-sacrifice on behalf of something greater that once defined courage. For example, today in our overly-therapeutic culture when someone shares their deepest fears, we’re quick to call it an act of courage. We talk about an athlete’s physical prowess on the field or the court as courageous. When someone shares their innermost self with the world we laud them for being courageous. We call it courage when someone decides to be different from the mainstream in their preferences, or fashion, music, the length and color of their hair.

McCain’s point is that while these kinds of actions may have something about them to commend or may be steps on the way to courage, courage, in the sense of the fullness of the virtue, they are not. For McCain, the standard for courage is clear: “the willingness to risk life or limb or serious injury for the sake of others or to uphold a virtue.” He says that when lesser actions are celebrated as courage, or when we as a society are too generous in our definition of courage, the consequences are not good: we risk having too few examples of real courage when the real thing is needed to inspire a person or a society to greatness. He posits the questions that if we are taught that simply being honest or doing our best or being our true selves
constitutes courage, will we be more or less likely to summon the real thing in a crucible? Will we be willing to take the hill in a battle, or stand firm when the hour demands it? Courage matters.

Now the interesting thing about this, particularly for those of us here, is that the opposite problem is also true. At the Naval Academy we’re surrounded by courage – real examples of it. Embossed on virtually every building and walk on this Yard, written in our own books of history, are unnumbered accounts of genuine, breathtaking courage. I still can’t walk into Memorial Hall without looking at the display of Colonel John Ripley in the left-side alcove and marveling over his stunning exploits at the Dong Ha Bridge on Easter Sunday, 1972. I can’t walk by Wesley Brown Field House or Luce Hall without looking at those two men, larger than life, Admirals James Stockdale and William Lawrence and not think about the ordeal they endured; and those precious words and phrases tapped on the walls of their prison cells to each other and their fellow POWs. We in the military, more than most, are surrounded by reminders of courage every day. But therein lies the danger – the danger of growing indifferent to these images, seeing them as fixtures, part of the landscape of our lives. Courage matters. It matters that we understand it aright; and it matters that we nurture it in our lives every day, and honor it in the lives of others.

But above all, it matters in the realm of faith and obedience to God. As believers courage means more than bravery on the physical battlefield, but constitutes a willingness to do what is right and pleasing to God even when no one else will; to bear witness to your faith, no matter the cost. This is the great lesson of Peter and John at Pentecost; and we need to be reminded of this. Class of 2013, you need to know that our world, the world into which you are entering, is becoming increasingly hostile to the place of faith and conviction. To use McCain’s standard we are moving into a time when to profess faith may indeed cost us injury to life, limb, reputation or career. One of the shifts in the religious landscape of our culture (and our military) is what many are calling the “rise of the nones.”¹ I’m not referring to an uprising of women in a religious order. I’m speaking about those who check the “none” box when asked about their religious affiliation. This number has grown significantly, especially in the last decade. In the 1950s, about 3% of Americans checked that box. Now, it’s 20% (1 out of 5). What’s more, those who do check the “none” box lead in many of our cultural institutions - the media, Hollywood, academia, even our government. The “nones” are having a significant influence on our society, our institutions and the way we think and act. The data indicates that on the whole, “nones” do not subscribe to the idea of religion or faith having anything to do with one’s public life. For example, one former Georgetown Law professor who now works on the federal level said that she is “having a hard time coming up with any case in which religious liberty should win.”² I suppose I appreciate her frankness, but the implications of her statement are disturbing.

A leading professor of philosophy and law at the University of Chicago says that there is no principled reason for legal or constitutional regimes to single out religion for protection. He goes on to describe religious belief as a uniquely bad combination of moral fervor and mental blindness, serving no public good that justifies special protection.³ These ideas and legal opinions are like a poison. And they’re more than just isolated examples of two of three peoples’ hostility to religion or faith. They represent a clear and growing

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¹ The following discussion of the “nones,” is taken from the May 2013 edition of *Imprimis.*
² *Imprimis,* May 2013.
³ *Imprimis,* May 2013
trend in our culture that would encourage you as rising leaders to check your religion at the door, to divorce your professional from your personal lives, and to never speak or bear witness to your faith. Let us not be deceived. Can we not hear in these voices the very same threats that were spoken to Peter and John by the Sanhedrin?

“And summoning Peter and John, the religious leaders commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.”

But we need not fear these threats. For one, it’s worth saying that we do have a constitutional right to express our faith. Class of 2013, you need to remember this. The First Amendment says that

“Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridge the freedom of speech...”

The Constitution, to which you are about to raise your right hand and swear to uphold and defend, guarantees you the right to express your faith. However, should this right ever be taken away, if the shadows lengthen in our land and the light of freedom grows dim, like Peter, we still have a Commission to be men and women of courage and boldness. And this commission isn’t a piece of paper or parchment that can be taken away or trampled under-foot. It cannot be denied or revoked or resigned. It cannot be lost. It is the sign and seal of the Holy Spirit on the hearts of all those who believe upon Jesus. It is the guarantee and surety that you are never alone and that that wherever you go, the Spirit of God will be your Helper. And even if this means you’re brought before rulers and authorities and kings to give an account of your faith, you need not to worry about what to say, for in that moment the Holy Spirit will give you the words when you need them.

THIS IS THE PROMISE OF PENTECOST and the word God has for you today.

Class of 2013, brothers and sisters, my prayer for you is that God would fill you with the power of His Holy Spirit to obey Him above all else, to bear witness to your faith no matter the cost, to be men and women of courage. And lo, He “will be you always, even unto the end of the age.”

They that have ears to hear, let them hear what they Spirit says to the church. Amen.