

“I Have Finished the Race”

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We have talked about three men, and I thought I'd better find time to talk about a woman of faith who has made a huge difference. Now we talked about an Old Testament person in King David; we talked about a New Testament hero in the Apostle Paul; and, Bill, last week talked about a twentieth century person of faith in Martin Luther King, Jr.

Now today I went on-line, and I tried to find who would be a contemporary person of faith who is living a powerful, meaningful life today, and I found (first I saw it on TV; you know God works through that television) [Laughter] and they were talking about - actually it was on CNN - the First Lady was talking about these Women of International Courage and Strength, so I looked it up on line and I want to be able to get it get it right. They were International Women of Courage Awards and they have been handed out since 2007. The President of the United States and the First Lady have handed these out awards to particular women throughout the world who have made a lasting difference.

I went through the list and I was so amazed, and I wish I could tell you about all of them. They were amazing women. But there is one woman I want to talk about in particular: she is from Syria, and her name is Sister Carolin Thhan Fachakh (Fa-hak). She is an amazing woman of faith. Sister Carolin was born in Aleppo and spent most of her life in Damascus. When the war in Syria started, Sister Carolin decided she would not flee and get away to a safe place; but wanted to be there for her people in the midst of their greatest burden, and if they had to suffer, so would she.

So, she started seeing all of these women displaced. The husbands had gone away to war; [they were] killed – murdered – and the women were trying to survive, many of them dying of starvation. So, she [Sister Carolin] gathered them together and started a nursery for the children - the littlest ones. She started out with 14, but as the war progressed, they were up over 200. The same applied as to what was she going to do for the mothers. Left alone without a way of feeding their children who were in that nursery school. So, she decided she would organize a tailoring workshop where women could come in for a year and be trained on how to sew. She received sewing machines from the United Nations, brought them into this room, and they started doing tailor work. Whatever [items] they made they sold to the United Nations, who spread them out around the world.

Now again, over 200 women in the past few years have gone on to make their own living and survive amidst this horrifying condition. They have almost been blown up any number of times, but they continue to function. She has raised money; she has gathered them together. At the end of this year - and the past couple of years now - at the end of the year, having been trained, they can take the sewing machine they were training on home and sell wares out of their own home, or they can stay and work for the workshop, and then sell their goods to the United Nations; who disperses them through their commission to refugees. Sure enough, it is has gone over beautifully.

She shares the faith with them, but what is so meaningful is that she says it is so important for us to have not only Christian women gathered together to help them, but Muslim

women as well. As the groups of women - half of them Christian and half Muslim - gathered together [this] helps people realize - and the children in the nursery realize - that whether you are Muslim or Christian, you are the same in God's eyes. Again, she made this beautiful comment that I want to read to you:

"We sisters help everyone [part of the Daughters of Mary Help in the Catholic church], giving our all and without making distinctions between Christian and Muslim, following Jesus' example. Our work is also aided by volunteers and Muslim partners; good and generous people who work with such devotion. We feel deeply respected by them as well as by the entire population, including the Army."

What she has done has bound together people of two extreme faiths. She has had threats made by ISIS against her, because she has had the gall to bring Christians and Muslims together. And, in the face of that adversity and the death threats and the fear of bombings from both sides, she continues to make a way in this world.

Now, I sit there and think, "Scott, what are you doing? When you are at the pearly gates with Sister Carolin, are you going to say, 'I fought the good fight. I have run the race. I have kept the faith.'?" How humbling I'm going to feel standing next to her at that moment.

Yet, I think to myself, "That's alright. This isn't a competition." As I went through the list of women in the International Awards, many of them are from the Middle East and many from war torn places. They were in Africa and dealing with the Hutus, and with the difficult, painful violence that was taking place. Almost every one of the women on that list had been brutalized, and then was caring for other women who had been brutalized.

I came to realize as I was reading through that list and what they had done, that they didn't set out to be heroic; they didn't set out to be heroes. They were not someone from this country going to be a hero and then run to Africa, or go to the Middle East. They were just survivors of their own circumstances. They had been placed in an awful situation and they stepped up in that moment and they initiated proper care in a world of chaos; many of them doing it based on their faith in the God of Abraham; in the God of Abraham that is the Father of Judaism; the father of Christianity and the father of Islam. We all share that same father - Abraham. So, I realized that these figures - these women of great heroic power - responded out of their own situation.

So, when you or I are standing at the pearly gates we are not going to be compared. Our situation is vastly different. We have been placed in a situation where we do not have many of those extremes that they have - but our call is the same: to reach out to those in need, to respond to those who cannot help themselves and *be* the difference. Initiate. Care. And, you are doing that when you provide your pledge.

Alone we can give a few bucks to the Red Cross, or alone we can send some money to help in Africa with the situation, through an outside organization; but when you pull together 1100 people in this congregation and we bring our pledges together, we can do so much more than anyone individual can do alone. When we pull our pledges together we provide for the children, so they can have the same hope of faith and nurture with the same power that King David had, that the Apostle Paul had, that Dr. King had, that Sister Carolin has.

That same Holy Spirit that filled Eleanor's heart [during her baptism] this morning is the same Holy Spirit that those third graders have when they open their Bibles. It is the same Holy Spirit that is available to each one of us when we initiate our faith. That is a blessing that God promises of us each and every day.

Now, I also think that God is intentional about who God calls. God called David, and we have gone through this, if you have been here on the other Sundays. King David had Bathsheba, and if you have ever been in a Bible study, boy, you know that one! That was not David's best moment. You also have the Apostle Paul. He started out killing Christians, then he went on in his writings, and he failed to say enough to stop slavery and the inequality of women. Then you move on to Dr. King who did amazing things and, yet, was not honoring the fidelity of his marriage.

And now, you move to Sister Carolin, and I read more about that after I just looked up that heading, and found her bio that was like two and a half paragraphs that really enthralled me. And [then] I come to find out that she has a problem. And hers is, she has refused to deny the dictator in Syria: Bashar al-Assad. She has called him "kind." She refuses to believe that he has dropped chemical weapons on innocent people. I was flabbergasted and so despairing that someone who could do so much, and love Christians and Muslims alike, could not get to the place where she could denounce the dictator in her own country.

And I thought, well, there is someone I can't use; another illustration down the tubes. But I went, "No. No. She is human. She is not perfect, and our heroes aren't perfect." We know that King David wasn't perfect. We know that Apostle Paul was not perfect. We know that Dr. King was not perfect. And now you know that Sister Carolin, in my opinion, is not perfect either.

And, that is the most freeing thing in the world, because now there is a chance for you and me - very imperfect people - at least you all are [laughter] and there is still room for us to do things that are meaningful, and powerful, and responsible, even with our shortcomings.

I believe deep within my soul that God picked flawed people for this Bible, and the stories and the way he uses them, so the rest of us flawed people can still do something heroic and loving and kind, and not fall into despair, because we are not perfect. We don't have to be.

I just love it when, outside these walls, people say, "I would never go to Church because it is full of hypocrites;" and, as I always like to say, "and there is room for one more here." [Laughter.] We are all a bunch of hypocrites because we can't live up to the perfection that Christ lived. So, we are done. We failed. But, that's why Christ died on that cross; that's why Christ was resurrected from that grave; that's why Christ ascended into Heaven. But the story wasn't done. The story continues by saying, "I will come and bring you unto myself - not once you figure it out through reincarnation, once you become perfect. No, I'm just going to bring you home - because of the grace and love of God through Jesus Christ. You are heroic."

In spite of ourselves, we are heroic. We are heroic when we work together. We are heroic when we see children up front wanting to know more about God and Jesus Christ through their Bibles. We provide heroic moments when we reach out, and there is a teenager

standing at this pulpit talking about what they want to do for other people in the mission, and she has the courage to stand here in front of 400 people and say, "Help me do that" - and you will answer that prayer of hers. You will respond.

I think one of the most heroic things you do is make this place so comfortable and so safe, that elementary school children can stand here on a stool - and not see over the pulpit - and read the Scripture. [They] share their prayers without any fear, because they know you have already accepted and loved them.

I have seen the heroic acts in each one of you, by the way in which you have taught our children, when you could have found something else to do. Sitting down on a Saturday night going, "Oh, my gosh. What a terrible week I have had! I have had to work all week and my own kids are being a pain in the neck," but you still get the lesson done, because you want to help the children in your class - and they are your kids. I have never seen a teacher in this Sunday school that has ever talked about "her kids," or "his kids" - so you get it done like you do for your own.

I see heroic acts in this Church when I see people going out to care for the homeless, sign up to help Family Promise. I see heroic acts in this congregation through so many things that we do. Just look in the back in the announcements every single week, the things that go on here.

And, I see heroic acts when you sacrificially give and write your name on a pledge card and promise that throughout this year you are going to continue to give; because there are a whole lot of people outside these walls that, every penny they get, they spend on themselves. But look at the example that you all are setting - no matter whether anybody else sees it or not.

I hope, parents, that you do sit down with your children when you are signing that pledge card, when you are coming up with that amount. And, it is not about the amount, it's about showing your kids that you are making a sacrifice. Every week you could go out to dinner and you stay home, so that you can make that payment; every time you could go to a movie or, God forbid, over a year's period of time you could take one heck of a vacation, but you do a stay-vacation so that you can give that gift to God. In that example you are heroic. That doesn't mean you are perfect; it just means you are making a difference by taking initiative.

Then, at the end of your days, you *will* have run the race - not perfectly, but you [will] have run it, you have *kept* the faith and you will have been an example - an example different from Dr. King, an example different from Sister Carolin - but it will be *your* example, in *your* faith that has touched so many lives and I want to thank you for that.

I thank you that we are able to do that together as a Church family - whose kids are all of ours, whose parents are all of ours. We laugh together, and we cry together. We pray together, and we are heroic together, in God's name. That is why we fill out our pledge cards. That's why we give sacrificially, to give joy in God's holy name. Amen.