

COURAGE TO CONTINUE

Sept. 13, 2020

Rev. Richard Maraj

Rev. Richard Maraj: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center Sunday virtual worship celebration. I'm Richard Maraj, senior minister, and it is a joy and a pleasure to be able to bring our virtual service to you. And we are so excited about being able to restart live services Sunday, October the 4th. It'll be outdoors; one service only at 9 a.m. And we'll be excited to start back; it's be like Easter! It'll be so much fun! So please come out and join us for that. I'll be emailing you more details on it. Please note that it's only the Sunday service; there will be one live. We'll still do recordings on Wednesday until we really feel it's safe enough just to start opening more and more. But this is a great beginning, and we can hardly wait to see you all live here at Sunday service October the 4th. Just circle that date!

We have some great music from Todd Herzog today, and Rev. Lori is going to lead us in a time of prayer and meditation. But to prepare us for that experience, the choir will lead us in the singing of, "Surely the Presence."

Unity Choir (singing remotely):

Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place;
I can feel God's mighty power and God's grace.
I can feel the brush of angel's wings;
I see glory on each face.
Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.

MEDITATION

Rev. Lori Fleming: I invite you to join me in a time of prayer and meditation. As we close our outer eyes, take in a deep cleansing breath, and release it slowly. Take in another deep, cleansing breath and gently let it go. As we begin to move our awareness within: into the depths of our souls. Into that quiet, still place where peace passes understanding. Where we are one with Spirit, and one with each other. In the state of infinite grace, always able to recognize that we are beings of love. Always remembering that we came here to love God and to love each other. And that, though the outer world may seem to be chaotic right now, that it's only the out-picturing of something unhealed within us.

And so, God, we call on you to take away the chaos. To let only love prevail. To let us see what needs to be healed in ourselves and other as we move forward to create a world where we are united. Where compassion leads first. Where we recognize that each and every person is created with sacred worth. And that, God, you love each and every one of us as your own beloved children. That you created us in an unique and unrepeatably way that none of us are exactly the same. And that is our purpose to be here: to be our own uniqueness. To live from our gifts and talents. To celebrate ourselves, and to heal ourselves at depth so that all that is left is love.

And so, God, we take a few moments to move more deeply into the silence as we recognize your loving presence within.

SILENCE

Thank you, sweet Spirit, for this time of prayer and meditation that unites us, that creates a bond of love between all of humanity. We're thankful for all of our blessings; for your love for us; for giving us the kingdom of heaven. And for this – and everything we enjoy: every single blessing – we say thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God! And it is so. Amen.

SONG

Todd Herzog: "Coming Home" (accompanied by Craig Bohmler on piano)

I put one foot in the water
Just to test my resolution
I'm not sure I've got exactly what it takes
But as my body's getting colder
My intent is growing bolder
And I push my limitations 'til they break
I don't care if this ends up a big mistake

I'll cross that bridge; I will not hide
I'll see what's on the other side
I'll step beyond the world I've come to know
And I won't let questions hold me back
My faith is more than what I lack
It's courage over reason where I'm going
I'm headed where my spirit's free to roam
I'm coming home

As I wade a little deeper
Fear and doubt begin to seep in
I wonder how I've gotten to this place
I'm about to head for shore
But something's stirring at my core
I know the time has come for me to find my way
I know that I am different today

I'll cross that bridge; I will not hide
I'll see what's on the other side
I'll step beyond the world I've come to know
And I won't let questions hold me back
My faith is more than what I lack
It's courage over reason where I'm going
I'm headed where my spirit's free to roam
I'm coming home

Now I am standing with my head above the water
Taking a breath before I slip into the sea
Saying a prayer as I prepare to cross the border
Then right before my eyes
The crimson sea divides

And I'll cross that bridge; I will not hide
I'll see what's on the other side
I'll step beyond the world I've come to know
And I won't let questions hold me back
My faith is more than what I lack
It's courage over reason where I'm going
I'm headed where my spirit's free to roam

I'm coming home
I'm coming home

[Light applause]

MESSAGE

Rev. Richard Maraj *[clapping]*: Thanks so much, Todd! Thanks, Craig! Really, really appreciate it. Great job!

So I heard a cute story about a man who stopped at a local park to watch a Little League game on his way home from work. And he sat behind one of the team's bench along the first base line. And he saw a little boy clapping and cheering. And he asked him; he said, "So what's the score?" And the little guy smiled and he said, "Well, it's 14 to nothing for them." And the man said, "Really? Because I have to say, you don't really seem that discouraged, in spite of the fact of the score." And the little boy said, "Discouraged? Why would I be discouraged? We haven't even gotten up to bat yet!"

I love that story! And it's an intro for me to ask this question of you: Have you ever been discouraged? Have you ever had a relationship or a family conflict or a job or financial situation that was just hard? That was just constantly a struggle that never seemed to get easier? And never seemed to get better? Have you ever had a time in your life where you felt like it was just one thing after the other?

I think we all experience times in our life where we feel discouraged. Where we feel disappointed. Where we feel a bit defeated. And we can get to the point where sometimes we feel a little hopeless; we feel a little powerless. We feel like giving up or even giving in.

Winston Churchill was remembered for successfully leading Britain through the second World War. And the other thing that he was really famous for was the inspiring messages and speeches that he gave. And especially about never giving up, no matter how badly things get. And one of my favorite quotes of his is this: "Success isn't final. Failure isn't fatal. But it is the courage to continue that counts." It is the courage to continue!

And, you know, when most of us think about courage, we think about courage being exclusively for heroes: somebody who goes into a burning building to save children or a sports star that scores the winning touchdown and gets carried off of the field on the shoulders of those around him. But the truth is that courage is something that we all have. Even though we don't always believe we have courage, we absolutely do. Courage is that thing that tells us to keep going, no matter how tough things are. Courage is the thing that pushes us on ahead to move forward, even though we can't see the end result yet.

Samuel Johnson once said that courage is the greatest of all virtues, because it takes courage to do everything else. It takes courage to believe. It takes courage to let go of the past. It takes courage to say "Yes!" It take courage to say "No!" It takes courage to face and handle an addiction. It takes courage to heal a relationship. It takes courage to overcome a loss and move through the process of grief. It takes courage to start your own business. It takes courage to forgive someone. It takes courage to change and transform our lives. It takes courage to go after our dreams. There isn't anything I can think of in life that doesn't require some level of courage.

And today I want to talk about the courage to continue.

In the Book of Joshua, there's a wonderful passage of God giving a "pep talk" to Joshua, who is taking over as a leader the children of Israel because of Moses just passing away. Now, following Moses was really a big deal. Because he was like a big hero! I mean, he was a revered leader! I mean, I'm talking about the "10 Commandments" Moses! The "parting the Red Sea" Moses! The "Pharaoh, let my people

go!” Moses! I mean, Moses was revered, and now he is gone, and Joshua was being called upon to take over and fill his leadership shoes.

I mean, filling in for Moses would be like filling in for Michael Jordan; following Gandhi; following Mother Teresa or Oprah. I mean, a really, really big, big deal! So here are some of the reassuring words that God gives to Joshua about taking over. It says, *“No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will never leave you or forsake you. **Be strong and courageous**, because you will lead these people I swore to their ancestors to give to them. **Be strong and very courageous!** Be careful to obey all the laws of my servant, Moses, and not to turn away to the left or the right that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of Law on your lips; meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful in everything you do to follow what was written. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? **Be strong and courageous**. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God, will be with you wherever you go.”*

And so here’s the interesting thing: In only four verses, God says three times, *“Be strong and courageous!”* And one of them was, *“Be strong and very courageous!”* Even though He’s promising and guaranteeing his success, and that I’ll be with you and you are called to do this, God knew that leading the children of Israel would take courage. It would take courage to cross the Jordan River. It would take courage at the battles of Jericho. It would take courage to plan. It would take courage to lead people, because they would complain and resist. It would take courage because there would be victories and defeats and moments of doubt and challenge and difficulty.

Even though God ordained this, and God said, *“I’ll be with you,”* He knew it was a mighty work that would absolutely take courage. And, to me, that speech about being courageous – and continuing and moving forward in the work that you’re called to do – is really a speech for all of us. Leading our own lives takes courage. Fighting the inner battles of doubt and struggle takes courage. Making decisions that other people may not always agree with about our own lives takes courage. Three times it’s repeated, because it’s a message to all of us: that we’ve been called to live great lives, but it will take courage.

And so this morning I want to talk about: How do we reclaim and reignite the courage that is in us? And especially the courage to continue through any area of your life where you feel like you’re struggling. Where it feels like it isn’t working as well as you’d like. So I want to talk about three aspects of courage.

And the first one is THE COURAGE TO BE TRUE TO YOURSELF. ee cummings once said, *“It takes courage to grow up and turn out to be who you really are.”* Shakespeare said, *“And this, above all: to thine own self be true.”* And finally, at the Temple of Apollo it says, *“Know thyself.”* It takes courage to be who we really are.

So I’ve been watching this TV show called *Episodes* on Netflix. And it’s about a TV show within a TV show, kind of starring Matt LeBlanc. And one of the characters – her name is Carol – she’s the executive assistant to one of the TV execs. And no matter what the person says, she always agrees ... whether she agrees or not. You know, she would say something like, *“Hey, wasn’t that show great last night?”* And he would say, *“No! It was horrible! I thought it was disgusting!”* And she’d say, *“You’re right; it was horrible! It was disgusting!”* Or she’d say, *“Isn’t that person really nice?”* And he’d say, *“No! He’s a jerk; I think he doesn’t even do a good job!”* And she’d go, *“You’re right! He is a jerk and doesn’t do a good job!”*

And it’s kind of hilarious; it’s almost these extreme thing of pleasing and of saying things just because someone else wants to hear. And it’s kind of cute and funny ... and then we have to think to ourselves: Have you ever said something to please someone? Have you ever agreed with something that you really didn’t really agree with, and you didn’t speak up? Have you ever said “Yes” when you really wanted to

say “No”? Have you ever not fully honored yourself just so that someone would like you, or you wouldn’t get them mad or upset?

I mean, I think it is amazing how often we will sometimes choose to not be true to ourselves to say something just so someone will like us, or they won’t be made at us. We are so afraid of rejection or abandonment or not being loved that we will compromise our own feelings, our own desires, our own goals in life, and allow ourselves to speak things and say things that aren’t true.

And the problem with that is – when we keep doing it over time – we get disconnected from ourselves. That we don’t ourselves; we don’t know what we want. We don’t know what we feel, because we’re always trying to please and act and say things in ways that aren’t honoring or authentic to ourselves.

What happens is: We put out all these ideas so that people will like us and even though they’re not true. And what it creates is imitation love. It’s not real love, because it’s not really who we are. They’re falling in love with some idea of what they think we are, but not really honoring to ourselves. And at some point, that stifles our soul. At some point, we can’t connect with the fullness of God’s Spirit, because we aren’t being who we came to be. We aren’t connecting with that level of peace and joy and fulfillment in doing the things that we are meant and called to do. So when we aren’t true to ourselves, we almost rob ourselves – and, quite frankly, rob others – of being the very best of who we came to be.

So I ask you: Where in your life are you not being true to yourself right now? Where in your life are you not being honest of owning what you want or what you feel or what you are called to do? Where in your life are you not saying something honest and important to someone that you really need to be sharing it with?

This is probably one of the most powerfully important areas of courage: the courage to be true to ourselves. And so the question is: Are we willing to work on it? And to reconnect and have that courage to be true to ourselves? Because that is the highest form of expressing the fullness of God, and making a difference by being true to ourselves. And, yes! It takes courage!

The second thing I want to talk about is THE COURAGE TO IMAGINE. You know, children have such vivid imaginations. They can think about anything and create all kinds of ideas. They think everything’s possible! And as they grow up, we tell them things like, “No; you’ve got to be realistic. That doesn’t ... that’s impossible.” And, over time, our imagination tends to diminish; we don’t use it as much. It tends to go dormant.

And then – if we’ve had difficulties in our lives repeatedly over and over again – we tend to only see a smaller version of life, and not really imagine and see things that are beyond whatever small picture that we have. Sometimes we can’t see to anything greater and better than the general things that have been happening to us.

Ever say, “I just can’t see that happening!”? Because sometimes we let our imagination go dormant. And we’re afraid – or sometimes not even able – to see something and greater than whatever’s going on currently in our lives.

But, you know, everything in our lives – and everything that has been made possible, that has ever been created – started in someone’s mind. Whether it was skyscrapers or skis; cars or computers; or bagpipes or boulevards; or coffee cups or cotton balls; or even concepts and philosophies ... everything began in the imagination: in that wonderful place of possibility in these incredible minds that we have been given.

And I want to show you the capacity of imagination and possibilities that we have. It’s in 2 Corinthians, and here’s what it says. It says, “So we look not to things that are seen, but at things that are unseen; for the things that are visible are temporal, and things that are invisible are everlasting, are eternal.” And so

what it's saying is: Look not to the things that are seen. Don't just look at the outer conditions of your life. But it says: Look to the things that are unseen. To that invisible realm. To that realm that cannot be seen with the eye, but only the inner eye to see a greater possibility. See, there is a difference between looking and seeing. When we look – see, right now I can see these walls – and my ability to see is limited by these physical things: by what can be seen. But if I were to close my eyes right now, right at this place I could take myself to a beach in Hawaii! You know, I could take myself to be in Toronto with my family, and having a party to get over the fact that the Raptors lost and are not in the play-offs anymore. I could take myself to anywhere I want to be. Because in the unseen, it's eternal. It is unlimited possibilities! And what is seen is limited.

And so this is saying: Don't look at the "seeing." Don't get conditioned by the physical things that are going on in your life. Go to the unseen place, and visualize something greater and something better for your life. So right now, look away from the conditions of your life. What is something better you can picture? In one area of your life. Think of one thing you can imagine that would be happier, that would be more joyful, more positive, more prosperous than what's going on in the physical world. Look at the unseen – this amazing capacity of the imagination – to something greater.

See, sometimes we have to have the courage to allow ourselves to use our imagination and hold a vision greater than what's going on. Let's not get trapped and consumed by the physical things; let's use that God – that unseen, invisible power of the imagination – to see greater things.

Einstein said, "*The imagination is a preview of life's coming attractions!*" So what would be a "coming attraction" that you could hold as a vision? And sometimes you've got to have the courage to keep holding it, because it doesn't happen overnight. Sometimes it takes work. It takes a lot of effort. Sometimes it takes time. But just holding out that imagination – that ability to have the courage to create a vision and see greater – will absolutely start shifting and changing and moving our lives in a new direction. Even giving out a level of hope, optimism and anticipation; it'll make a difference. But we've got to reignite and have the courage to imagine.

The last thing I want to talk about is THE COURAGE TO ACT. We can have all the courage in the world, but at some point, you've got to do something. At some point, it takes action. It takes a step. It takes something has to move. That's why Scripture says, "*Faith without works is dead.*" You've got to hold these lovely thoughts and ideas and images, but until we put it into action – until we get that momentum and movement going – it will not make a difference.

And so it takes courage to act! I'll bet every single one of us has probably allowed fear to stop us from trying something. Fear stopping us from saying or doing or creating whatever it is that we want in our lives. It's the courage to act.

In 1912, Jim Thorpe participated in the Olympics that I believe were in Sweden. And he was the first Native American to compete for the United States. And on the second day, he had his shoes stolen. And it was in track and field. And he ended up finding two pairs that did not match in the garbage, and he used them. He put two socks on, on the one that was too big. And, not only did he not complain and have the courage to act – the courage to go out there and compete – but he ended up winning two gold medals on that same day! And also, he competed in the decathlon, and he won four of the 10 events. And then he finished in the top four in the other six events which, to this day, no other decathlete has finished so high in so many events. The king of Sweden, when giving him his medals, pronounced the greatest athlete in the world.

Interestingly, Dwight Eisenhower played football with Jim Thorpe in the same season. And he recounted afterwards, when he was president, of a time that Jim Thorpe was so amazing. He said he scored a 92-yard touchdown, but he got called back because of a penalty. And they got a five-yard penalty. And on

the very next play, he scored on a 97-yard run! And Dwight Eisenhower said that Jim Thorpe was the greatest athlete, and he did things that he never saw another athlete do.

Unfortunately, they took his medals away from him, because a couple of years later he played some minor league baseball, and it violated the amateur rule. But 30 years after his death, they reinstated and gave him his medals back.

And the point I want to make here was: On that day, when he didn't have shoes, and he wasn't known as a great athlete yet ... He didn't have shoes; he didn't have the right equipment. They didn't fit right. He could have made an excuse. He could have said, *"Look, somebody stole my shoes. I'm at a disadvantage. Things aren't right!"* He did not let those conditions stop him from competing. Stop him from acting. Stop him from racing. Stop him from putting his talents out there in the greatest way that he could.

And the point I'm trying to make is: Sometimes, in our own lives, we think, *"Well, I'm disadvantaged."* Or, *"I don't have this."* Or, *"I don't have the education."* Or, *"I don't have the looks."* Or, *"I don't have the height."* And we stop and we don't even try. We don't even act. But we have to have the courage to put it out there still. Because our actions – even in those conditions that aren't ideal – will produce something great.

I want to bring up David in the Bible, who became king. King David. And Peter. And do you know why both of them rose to the levels that they did? Because for both of them, you know what it was? It was the courage to act! None of the children of Israel would fight the great Philistine, Goliath. None of them would; they wouldn't even try! David was the only one who was willing to try. And I guarantee you, even if he didn't kill the giant, but went out there and fought, it would have raised his energy, his vibration. And it would have pleased God and brought more good into his life, because he was willing to act. He was willing to try. He didn't even have armor that could fit him; it was a giant against a little guy! But he wanted to be out there. And he had the courage to act.

Now, Peter: Remember? He stepped out of the boat and he was on the water for a while. Then he got a little freaked out, and then he sunk. And still, Jesus eventually said that, *"You are the rock upon which I'll build my church."* Why? Because Peter was willing to try. He was willing to put his faith into action and give it a shot. And even though he didn't succeed, he was rewarded for the action.

That's why I love the line in the Book of James that says, *"Be doers of the Word, not just hearers, for you will be blessed in your doing."* That, every time you take an action – even if it's in the wrong direction – you'll get the correction, and the action will have produced a better result. We will always be better for trying. And, even if it doesn't work, something else will work ... because we will put a momentum and an energy out into the Universe that will feed back to us something positive that will give us a new sense of direction. Maybe a new idea. Or meet someone from it. Because we were willing to put it out there.

So what is it that you've been putting off that you know that it's important to do? What is one action you could take towards your better life? Towards your goal? Towards your dream? What is one thing you can do that will absolutely make a difference in your life? And that you will feel better for? You don't have to think of all 10 of them; just think of the next thing you can do, and I guarantee you, it'll create a momentum, and it will lead you to greater and better things.

Another quote that I like from Winston Churchill is this one. He says, *"Success is going from failure to failure without losing enthusiasm."* [Laughs] And I love that quote! Because it still says ... it's talking about courage! To have the courage that – even when things don't work out the first, second, third, fourth time – that you keep going. That you keep trying.

It takes courage to live our lives. It takes courage to face what you're facing. It takes courage to face what we're all facing right now. And, as Scripture says: Be strong and courageous; be strong and very

courageous! Because the more courageously we live our lives, the more we open ourselves to live a more full and abundant life.

Have the courage to be true to yourself. Have the courage to imagine something greater and better. And have the courage to act. Take an action! Put your energy into motion. Because success isn't final; failure isn't fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts!

God bless you!

OFFERING

Rev. Lori Fleming: It's that time in our service to give of our gifts and our tithes and our offerings. We're so grateful to all of you in this time when we have not been able to meet together in person, that you've continued to support this ministry with your checks, with your donations online. We're just so grateful for all of you!

If you'll hold your offering in your hands, our offering blessing is: *"Divine love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give, and all that I receive."* Will you affirm that with me? *"Divine love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give, and all that I receive."* Mother/Father God, we say thank you for these gifts and these tithes and these offerings. They're too numerous to count! We're so grateful that they bless us, and they bless this ministry, and they bless everyone in the world. And so thank you, God, for this offering. Thank you, God. Amen.

CLOSING

Rev. Lori Fleming: So, we're so grateful to all of you who are watching us online; we miss all of you so much! You've probably heard that we're planning the first Sunday in October to meet on the lawn. We'll have social distancing and, of course, we'll all be wearing masks. We've got new sound equipment; you'll be able to sit all over the campus and hear us. So we're really looking forward to being back in person!

And now will you join me in listening to the choir sing the Peace Song?

Unity Choir (singing remotely):

Let there be peace on Earth;
And let it begin with me.
Let there be peace on Earth;
The peace that was meant to be.

With God as Creator,
Fam'ly all are we.
Let us walk with each other
In perfect harmony.

Let peace begin with me,
Let this be the moment now.
With ev'ry step I take,
Let this be my joyous vow:
To take each moment
And live each moment
In peace eternally.

Let there be peace on Earth;
And let it begin with me!

Rev. Lori Fleming: And will you affirm the Prayer for Protection with me?

The light of God surrounds us;

The love of God enfolds us;

The power of God protects us;

The presence of God watches over us.

Wherever we are, God is.

And all is well! Abundant blessings!

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