

A Culture of Cowards

May 2023

Some days I feel like I am living in a culture of cowards. People are hiding behind darkened car windows, sending missives through their computers they would never deliver face-to-face, putting on masks, going berserk on subways, committing mass murders without uttering a word or revealing their identities, stealing other's identities in the darkness of the web, mowing down innocent people on sidewalks using trucks as battering rams, and sending bombs through the mail. Too many of our fellow citizens have found dangerous comfort in darkness rather than light. Many people seem fearful of looking others in the eye, being honest, courageous, and brave, working through differences with grace and understanding. Even our governmental leaders avoid sitting at the table to solve differences. Many in our society have become cowards; and sadly are increasingly dangerous and numerous in our world. They are not listening to the teachings of Jesus, yet many still call themselves Christians. In fact, they are being fooled by the Father of Lies, Satan himself. And if we don't stand up, confront and stop them, they will continue to rage and ruin our beloved communities as well.

This week, the United States surgeon general, Dr. Vivek Murthy, issued an extraordinary public warning about the dangers of social media. Finally, someone is willing to talk about the obvious – that much of social media is a major threat to the mental and emotional wellbeing of all people, especially young people. The report concludes that nearly 40 percent of children ages 8 to 12 use social media on a regular basis. At these very critical ages, brains are still developing and emotional well-being is at its most fragile



state. Alarming increases in depression and anxiety among high school and college age students is threatening an entire generation. Too often I hear stories about bullying on social media, and in the worst cases, suicides and homicides result. Social media is not reality, no matter what anyone tells you. There is no substitute for being face-to-face, eye-to-eye with another person to experience life at its fullest. Images and emojis are often poor and dangerous substitutes.

No one was braver and more willing to look someone in the eye than Jesus Christ. He modeled courage, honesty, and forthrightness wherever he went. He did not strike back against his enemies with violence. Often, he would disarm those who disagreed with him with a thoughtful question or story. He knew the dangers of operating in the dark. He constantly challenged people to walk in the light and stand under the scrutiny of truth and grace. He knew who was being a coward and those who were brave. He even warned about sending lawyers to do our dirty work. Jesus still asks us to do everything possible to settle disputes peacefully, face-to-face instead of heading to court. He wants us to trust and believe that truth and justice will triumph in the end. There is no reason to panic if we place our faith in him and remain in the light. When lies, gossip, and persecution were surrounding him and his followers, he said these famous words to his disciples, "But don't be afraid of those who threaten you. For the time is coming when everything that is covered will be revealed, and all that is secret will be made known to all. What I tell you now in the darkness, shout abroad when daybreak comes. What I whisper in your ear, shout from the housetops for all to hear." (Matthew 10:26,27)

During my last trip to Egypt in March, I witnessed how some things are changing. Today, there is less tension and persecution against Christians than during the last 40 years when fundamentalist and militant Islam had the upper hand in the Middle East. More moderate Muslim leaders, with the clear exception of the Ayatollah Khamenei in Iran, are giving Christians more freedoms; and that is certainly the case in Egypt. Previously, Christians were under intense surveillance and persecution by the Egyptian government. Once I was privileged to meet the founding minister of the largest protestant church in the Middle East, the Reverend Menes Abdul Noor, who pastored Kasr El Dohara in Cairo. One day, he showed me his study inside the church and told me that secret police had planted listening devices in every corner of his room trying to catch him sharing his Christian faith with Muslims. But that did not stop him. He said he would talk to them calmly but loudly, while staring directly at the surveillance devices, daring them to arrest him; but they never did because they knew how respected and popular he had become in Cairo. As a result, Kasr El Dohara today has over 10,000 members and is sending missionaries throughout the Middle East, sharing the love of Christ with thousands of Muslims.



Rev. Menes Abdul Noor of Egypt

Rev. Menes has passed away, but his legacy remains. He was part of the “greatest generation” who modeled bravery, forthrightness and integrity so well. Martin Luther King Jr. was molded in the same spirit. Dr. King neither ran from controversy nor was intimidated by it. He would stand in the middle of the streets of America, preach the Gospel, demand justice, and allow the authorities to arrest and jail him. As his Lord Jesus had taught him, Dr. King did not panic. He rested in the faith that truth and grace would triumph in the end. As a young boy in the 1950s and ‘60s, I remember looking up to my own father and grandfather as courageous and peaceful men who spoke so easily and confidently about their opinions and passions to bring greater health care to Americans. They were busy with their work, serving their families and churches, and would never dream of maligning others publicly or attacking their character. They knew God would sort out differences and be the ultimate judge.

We are at a crucial time in history. We must stop rewarding cowards and those leaders who lie and pad their resumes. We need to leave the comforts of our own homes and step outdoors, taking a break from computers and electronic screens to chat more frequently with our neighbors and breathe fresh air. We should seek to have coffee more often with people who whose opinions might be different than our own. We should reach out more frequently and say we are sorry to someone we have hurt. We need to admit our errors and not feel shame. We need to recognize and confess our addictions to hand-held devices and other material things that keep us in the dark and threaten our souls. We need to recognize and promote people of character who are courageous, honest, and forthright, not just power-hungry status seekers.

This Sunday, we will be celebrating Pentecost, remembering the dramatic moment when the Holy Spirit descended upon the huddled and bewildered disciples who had gathered after the

death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord, Jesus Christ. During their fasting and praying, the Holy Spirit rushed into their upper room and emboldened their hearts with a new faith. Instead of being timid and tempted by cowardice, the disciples became full of love, bravery, and truth. Suddenly they were willing to live for their belief and die for their faith rather than compromise or surrender.

They were no longer intimidated by bullies, liars, and cowards. They became powerful witnesses for their Messiah Jesus; and they healed countless suffering and desperate people. When power-hungry and self-serving mobsters tried to intimidate and frighten them, the disciples were not daunted. They were emboldened to become more forthright and unafraid. The Book of Acts beautifully captures this scene, "The members of the Jewish council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men with no special training in the Scriptures...But since they could see the man who had been healed standing right there among them, there was nothing the council could say. So they ordered Peter and John out of the council chamber and conferred among themselves...they called the apostles back in and commanded them never again to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter replied, 'Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him? We cannot stop telling about everything we have seen and heard.'" (Acts 4:13a, 14, 15,18-20)



Peter and John standing before Sanhedrin after Pentecost

It is not easy to change our ways, become more like Jesus, especially when an increasing number of people in our society today are headed the opposite direction. We have an abundance of entertainment options to keep us numb, happy, and isolated from other people; legalized pot, gambling, hand-held devices, and social media are perfect breeding grounds for becoming more suspicious and fearful of other people. Darkness wants to captivate us. By the minute, we are losing our basic people skills of relating to others with respect, reverence, and openness. But it doesn't have to be this way. We can resist if we know which way to go.

Pentecost invites us to enter our own individual upper rooms, shut the door, get down on our knees, and pray. It is an invitation to embrace the light of God, and live boldly, faithfully, and courageously even when darkness surrounds us.