

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Nov 20th 2013

The story of Eleazar has become one of my favorites. There are several stories about character in the Catholic bible that got omitted from the Lutheran version, so I didn't know about them as a child. But I don't think I missed much...then. I would not have really understood it anyway. The story about Eleazar is for adults, I think. Mature adults. This story is about courage -- which brings me to my reflection for today. It seems to me that there is a big difference between courage and bravery.

According to Webster's dictionary, bravery is about gallantry and splendor. Courage is an attitude of facing and dealing with danger, difficulty, and pain instead of withdrawing from it. It is about purpose and spirit. From my perspective, bravery is for youth. Courage is for adults.

Now, when I was a child, I understood bravery, but I didn't understand courage. I don't think that is so unusual. I loved the stories of Daniel in the lion's den, David and Goliath, Moses leading the Israelites through the Red Sea, Joshua and the Battle of Jericho, and Shadrach, Mishach and Abednego in the fiery furnace. I was impressed by their bravery. I understood very simplistically that these biblical heroes all did great things for God because God was with them. As a child, it was those stories and my faith that gave me my self-confidence. According to my parents, maybe more than what was good for me. I was a brave child, and despite the fact that I was quite shy, I was drawn to adventure.

And as I bungled my way through life, I figured God was with me and I wasn't really afraid of too much. "Be not afraid" are the words most repeated in the Old and New Testaments and I took great comfort in them. Off I went to change the world. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't, but I just kept working at it. I can see why people think I have had a guardian angel looking after me. I never thought about life that way, but I did think it was a waste of time to be afraid.

But now I am thinking that the call to "Be not afraid" is not about bravery. That is just what I was thinking from the perspective of my adventuresome youth. The bible does not encourage a faith that gives a fine appearance of gallantry or splendor. The life of faith is not about daring or adventure. Instead, I have come to learn, faith is about courage. It is about an attitude or spirit of facing danger, difficulty, and pain that is real. Sooner or later, everyone has to deal with it. I never had real danger, difficulty, or pain when I was young. Maybe I still don't. But I do understand the attitude and the spirit of courage. I see it a lot in others, especially the elderly. That is why, now as an adult over sixty, I admire Eleazar. Here is a guy with an attitude of courage, but not one of bravado! The story says that Eleazar made up his mind in a noble manner to face the consequences of resisting the temptation to abandon his faith for an alien religion. He didn't withdraw from the penalty. He courageously accepted his fate -- torture and death. And he did it with a purpose in mind -- "to leave to the young a noble example of how to die willingly and generously for the revered and holy laws." He offered up his suffering with joy. This is a model of courage says the tale. I do think so! I think Eleazar is a real role model.

So, now, if I read the Psalm for today from the perspective of Eleazar's faith, it is all about courage.

It isn't about bravery in facing adversity that has a heroes ending. I don't think, therefore, that any adversity in my life is going to end in some dramatic event in which I triumph. It is pretty much going to be there every day in some way or another for me, and it will intensify as I grow older. I have seen this in the lives of my grandparents and parents. Growing older won't be easy. The lessons today help me consider that courage is about me dealing with the adversity I will surely encounter with courage, knowing that the Lord upholds me and will help me face it.

Somewhere along the way, thank God, I grew up enough to stop seeking to be a hero. That was liberating. But now, I am praying that I can become a model of courage for youth in dealing with adversity in some way or another -- and that I can do it generously. Pray for me, my friends. I join with you as we all pray for courage for each other to deal with our adversities and for sincere thankfulness that the Lord upholds us in our struggles.

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