

## **We've Got Guts**

*A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon*

*UU Church of Columbia, MO*

*Sunday, September 14, 2014*

I felt ill when I heard about Mike Brown's death in Ferguson, Missouri. A black man gunned down in the street and left to lie there for hours. A life snuffed out, parents grieving, and on top of it layers and layers of racism and fear and hopelessness.

On top of it a system of devaluing black and brown bodies and lives – a system in which my own life is caught up and intertwined.

On top of it, a system from which I benefit as a white person - the privilege in my life built upon the oppression of others, built by forces beyond my power but toward my benefit.

A system that serves me at too high a cost, a system in which I want no part, but which often feels impossible to resist.

And that is all on top of the brutal death of a human sibling, the loss of a precious human life.

And I began to reflect on the fact that his death, and the death of Eric Gardner in New York, and Tarika Wilson in Ohio, and countless others... these deaths were tragedies in and of themselves – horrible and significant and heartbreaking. But they were also, I had to realize, in some real way the cost of my privilege.

What a horrifying truth. It all made me feel helpless and sick, a pit in my gut, nausea every time I read another article or heard another interview. I wanted to turn off the tv, avoid the news. Go back to the ordered world where living my life has nothing to do with the loss of his.

In the words of this morning's reading by Rollo May: "When we don't want to confront even the *issue* of whether or not we'll come to the aid of someone who is being unjustly treated, we block off our perception, we blind ourselves to the other's suffering, we cut off our empathy with the person needing help. Hence the most prevalent form of cowardice in our day hides behind the statement "I did not want to become involved." (*The Courage to Create*)

In a 2009 speech, attorney general Eric Holder reflected that, "in things racial we have always been and I believe continue to be, in too many ways, essentially a nation of cowards."

A nation of cowards, by default. For the most prevalent form of cowardice is not a conscience denial of our help or participation in justice-making, so much as a cutting off of our empathy and understanding.

The most prevalent form of cowardice is when we turn off the TV, avoid the news, turn away. Our cowardice is not even always chosen; it is simply our tendency not to see the very system that thrives on its invisibility to most white eyes: the water of systemic racism in which we swim.

Michael Brown was a fellow Missourian, and so we've been forced to see, for a time. But we've glimpsed this reality before, over and over in our lifetimes, again and again over centuries in our country.

Will we turn away again?

That is the question for me now. Shall we go back to our default of perceptual cowardice - blindness to the reality before us, so easy for white people, though impossible for people of color?

Or, shall we, quoting Rollo May, once more: "seize the courage necessary to preserve our sensitivity, awareness, and responsibility?"

Can we stay sensitive and aware enough to respond?

Shall we recognize that pit in our stomach, that ache in our heart, as the insistent calling to do something differently? Shall we recognize it as compassion – the call to empathetic response?

In the new testament, Jesus talks about compassion in his parables. In the original greek, the word that we translate as compassion is *splagchnizomai* (*splahnk* – NIH – zo – my). *Splagchnizomai* is a verb, an action, and it literally means, to be moved in the bowels.

There's no making this up. When Jesus talks about compassion, he is speaking of a movement in the bowels.

The bowels were the ancient seat of the soul and the place of transformation, and so feeling compassion meant being moved in the gut.

In her letter to her young son, blogger Glennon Doyle Melton talked about heartache as the calling to compassion. But perhaps it is more physically accurate, or at least more biblically accurate (never thought you'd hear me speak of biblical accuracy, did you?) to think about the call to compassion as a twisting in the gut.

When I heard about Michael Brown's death, when I thought about my complicity in this culture of injustice that kills, I felt nauseous. I felt moved.

Do I have the courage to stay with that feeling, to keep on feeling it? Because it needs to be felt, if anything is going to change.

And I can't stop there. Scholar and public prophet Cornel West recently said: "empathy is not simply a matter of trying to imagine what others are going through, but having the will to muster enough courage to do something about it."

In this way, as in the Greek, compassion is a verb. Moral courage requires to us to be moved and then to move. Moral courage requires us to understand compassion as the call to pay attention, and then to listen, learn, speak up, read out, stand with.

So how do we do that?

No, seriously, how do we do that?

We live in a globalized, commoditized world that overwhelms us to the point of desensitization. The streams of horrors and injustices on our televisions and radios and in our newsfeeds flood the senses, and if we were to truly feel each of them, we'd be doubled over without reprieve from the twisting in our guts, immobilized beyond the point of any action at all.

Furthermore, the clear visibility of our interconnectedness, brought on by a global, digital age, has helped us see what has always been true. That it is very difficult, and perhaps impossible to live a life that is not at someone else's expense.

The moment you buy pretty much anything at all, you are benefiting from below poverty wages somewhere in the world, in the United States or abroad. The moment you step out your door, if you are white, or straight, or male, or able-bodied, and I could go on, you are benefiting from privilege that costs someone else something real.

And it is all so complex and intertwined, that we cannot begin to *know* how to act.

So how *do* we respond? How *do* we practice moral courage in a postmodern, globalized world?

I don't know.

I don't know, and perhaps that is exactly the place to start. With humility and the guts to not know, but to attune ourselves for when compassion calls us to listen and learn more.

To be sensitive, aware, and responsible, as Rollo May suggests, takes courage in this beautiful, brutal world. The courage to not know. The courage to engage anyway.

It means listening to the twisting in our guts whenever we feel that twinge that calls us to reach out, the voice of Love whispering to us to get involved, as Glennon Melton describes in her beautiful letter to her son.

That voice will call us each differently, but it will always call us to compassion, and if we listen humbly to that voice, we'll at least have found a start.

So I've been learning something since Mike Brown's death in Ferguson about what true moral courage means, because I listened to that sick feeling and reached out to learn more.

I've been learning about moral courage from my African American minister colleagues as they voice their range of experience and emotion. I've been learning about moral courage from community members naming their reality here in Columbia and worry about what could happen to them.

And I hope that I've been following their lead to that first step toward moral courage, myself.

I'm realizing that very little of the activism I've engaged in before has taken the courage that it took these last weeks to sit down and ask and listen to the stories and experiences of my African American neighbors and colleagues. And my courage paled next to theirs.

For me, it was scary because those conversations risked my comfortable worldview – compelled me to see more clearly the wrong that works around and even through me.

In his novel, *Another Roadside Attraction*, Tom Robbins writes: "You risked your life, but what else have you ever risked? Have you ever risked disapproval? Have you ever risked economic security? Have you ever risked a belief? I see nothing particularly courageous in risking one's life. So you lose it, and you go to your hero's heaven and everything is milk and honey 'til the end of time. Right? You get your reward and suffer no earthly consequences. That's not courage. Real courage is risking something might force you to rethink your thoughts and suffer change and stretch consciousness. Real courage is risking one's clichés."

I still need to learn more, risk more. There is still much I am not seeing. And yet, the relationships are begun, the conversation is begun.

And you know what, I feel relieved.

It turns out that this divided worldview, this thinking things are one way when they are only that way for me? That is just another way to describe isolation.

The kind of courage that takes real guts – that calls us outside what we know and into the worldview of another– that courage brings hope. It brings transformation. It brings a whole new world into our sight and connection to our hearts.

Hanging on to one cliché, if Tom Robbins will allow it, with great risk comes great reward. When we risk our comfortable worldviews to build honest relationships of compassion and love, the reward is no less than what my Christian colleagues call the Kingdom of God, what Martin Luther King Jr. called the Beloved Community, what we might call a thriving, flourishing web of all life.

A flourishing which may not come all at once, but which lives among us when we have the guts to reach out and make way.

The reward for our courage is friendship and hope. The reward is healing.

The reward is an interfaith, interracial, inter-economic Faith Voices of Columbia meeting this coming Tuesday, at 7pm at All People's International Ministry church in the Columbia Housing Authority development on McBaine, where we of various ethnicities and experiences will sit down together and eat cookies and speak the truth and listen.

The reward is our own humanity, made fuller and more profound by our restored ties to one another.

The reward is the spirit of Compassion moving among us and through us, bowels, hearts, and all.

The reward is the fullness of our faith, set free from fear and turned at last to Love.

May it be so, and let us make it so, because we've got guts!