Introduction

Texts of Courage, Failure, and New Hope

When I was looking for biblical texts that exhibited the themes of hope and courage, the life of Simon Peter came to mind. He demonstrated courage, and he had, at times, hope against the odds; but Peter also failed along the way. Of course there are other biblical people who demonstrated these characteristics, too, so why focus on Simon Peter in a study of courage, failure, and new hope? Well, his confession is the rock on which the church is built, for one. He was prominent among Jesus’ twelve disciples. And, he was so extreme—quick to talk, slow to think, courageous, cowardly, exuberant, frightened—so human. Simon Peter reminds me of me. I think I have a lot of Simon Peter in me. I would love to be as balanced, as mild, and as saintly as the Johannine disciple who lays on Jesus’ bosom and who arrives at Jesus’ grave before Simon Peter and who will care for Mary, Jesus’ mother, as a son does for his mother—but I am not that saintly. I am not that meek and mild. I have rough edges. I am more the Simon Peter type who can be loud and overly confident (though well-intentioned, of course), who can put his foot in his mouth, who can lop off the High Priest’s servant’s ear—and who then is too scared to declare his allegiance to Christ in front of a servant girl. The “I don’t know the man” or “I don’t know what you are talking about—therefore leave me in peace” response is a familiar pattern in my life—and I suspect in your life and in the lives of many people you know, as well.

In my life, I experience not only themes of hope and courage, but also elements of courage, failure, and
redemption. In my journey, the redirection from the philosophical (lofty) theology of my doctoral field to the (gritty) theology of clinical pastoral education (CPE) was very important. The change from a systematic or philosophical theologian looking toward a career in academic (lofty, comfortable, theoretical) theology to a chaplain and chaplain educator (CPE supervisor) and administrator of a department of pastoral care in a major U.S. hospital has made me more and more aware of the fact that failure and hopelessness are just as much topics of human life as the themes of hope and courage.

Simon Peter—in most of the stories that are written about him—comes across as a very real person. He’s not a caricature or a boring, angelic appropriation of the sanctified life. The portrayal of this particular disciple is realistic, gritty, interesting, engaging, human, hopeful and down to earth. I can see myself, in my own human struggles, better captured in the figure of Peter than in the figure of John or Paul. So, I have chosen to focus on Peter because I find I have a lot to learn from his life.

What are your own associations with the three terms, “courage,” “failure,” and “new hope”? Is there any one theme that’s more dominant in your life than the other two?

I admire people who, like Peter, wrestle with a lot of inner demons, people who have to get up every morning, take anxiety into their own understanding of the holy, and live a faith that allows for doubt and that wrestles with despair. I admire people who know about the demonic (not the little demons that float in the air but the human struggles of sexuality, commitment, immigration, peace, and war), and who know that the divine and the demonic are never far from each other—they are both part and parcel of the “human predicament,” as the theologian Paul Tillich liked to say.

Many patients who come to the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, MD find their way to the Administrative Building, which used to be the entrance to the hospital. In this old building, with a beautiful dome on
top stands a ten-foot marble statue of Christ. The statue is on a platform with an inscription that reads: “Come unto me all ye that are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). Many patients receive hope from an encounter with this statue of Christ that, for many, translates into an encounter with the living Christ, or with the Great Physician, or with a power greater than their own. Stories of many of the patients, family members, physicians, and staff whose hope was kindled or rekindled by meditating at the feet of Christ, pondering the message of Christ who invites us with open arms are collected in a beautiful book, *Here is My Hope*. Christ—as pictured vividly in this powerful statue—encourages us to unburden ourselves and to look at him just as Peter looked at him again after he had been frightened by the waves and began to sink (Matt 14:22-33).

These sessions are an invitation to be real, to be honest, to be forthright, and to be courageous as well as hopeful. With God there is always a new beginning—always, always, always—no matter how often they warned you in seminary or a Bible study about “cheap grace.” These sessions show that just as Christ admonishes us to forgive our brother, sister, or neighbor near or far, seventy times seven times (Matt 18:21-22), so God through Christ is ready to give us grace and to invite us back into discipleship—if need be on a daily or hourly basis. May you, and people with whom you share these studies, be blessed in the reading and discussing of these sessions from the life of Simon Peter on courage, failure, and new hope.

**Sources**