

October 10, 2010
Rev. Dr. Steven H. Koski
“A Time to Dare”
Esther 4.1-16

Have you ever had those moments in your life when you sensed you were being called to a bigger life...called to something bigger, larger, greater...and you knew you could either play it safe, retreat in fear or you could take a risk, trust and step out in faith?

T.D. Jakes said, “If you’re not willing to step outside of your comfort zone and be uncomfortable, you need to ask yourself are you really growing? Are you living the life God has called you to live?” He said, “There is spiritual greatness in you...a spiritual giant in you waiting to be released?”

We’re beginning a new message series focusing on the idea of stewardship. A steward is a caretaker...some one entrusted to care for something valuable. We are stewards of God’s dreams, God’s hopes, God’s purposes of redeeming the world with love.

We are the stewards of this one, wild and precious life, as poet Mary Oliver puts it, that we have been gifted...that we have been entrusted.

We are the stewards of the calling that God has placed within the life of this community of faith...a calling to not just make a difference but to make a different world...transforming people’s lives and transforming the world with God’s unconditional love.

We make the mistake of thinking stewardship is about raising enough money to meet the church budget. If that was what stewardship was really about there we would be easier and more effective ways to raise money. I would begin by inviting you back to church tonight for BINGO.

Stewardship is ultimately about you and your life and the invitation to abandon the house of fear and choosing to dwell in the house of love.

It is about growing in our faith and trust as followers of Jesus asking ourselves, courageous questions, “Am I growing in generosity and compassion? Are most of my decisions motivated by fear and self-preservation or do my decisions come from a place of love? Am I loving, is my life closed or open? Am I willing to risk more and more of myself for the purposes of God? Am I living a small life or am I living a big life?”

As a community of faith, are we focusing our energy and resources on trying to survive and maintain the status quo in these difficult times or is this one of those moments where we are called to rise up, risk, trust, give of ourselves and love like never before?

Our theme for this year’s Stewardship season – **SEE HOW THEY LOVE!**

The early church grew in numbers and influence in the most challenging of times for one reason – **THE BOLDNESS AND WITNESS OF THEIR LOVE!**

It wasn’t their theology, their worship services, their potluck dinners. It was their whole-hearted commitment **TO LOVE LIKE JESUS.**

There were two massive epidemics in the first 200 years after the death of Jesus that wiped out about 1/3 of the population of cities in the Roman Empire. This created so much fear in the population that an ancient writer named Dionysius wrote this about the general response of the folks living in the Roman Empire at this time, “They pushed those who were sick away and fled from even their own family members throwing them into roads before they

were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping to avoid disease.”

It was the followers of Jesus who chose this not as a time to retreat in fear but a time to love like never before. They took people in, cared for the sick and dying, often at the risk of their own lives. They used their own resources to care for widows, orphans, lepers.

This was a time of such suffering and fear and people couldn't believe what they were witnessing in this small community who followed the way of Jesus. They turned to one another and said, “SEE HOW THEY LOVE!”

Historians say the witness of this love played a huge role in the growth and spread of the way of Jesus throughout the ancient world. There had never been a community like this. While everyone else retreated in fear, this community of followers of Jesus dared to love like never before and it is a matter of historical record that their love changed the world.

In these fear-filled, challenging times, maybe this is our moment to loosen the grip that fear has on us and open our arms, and hearts and lives and dare to love like Jesus so the community around us and even the world might say, “SEE HOW THEY LOVE!”

Maybe God put you here, us here, at this difficult time, like Esther in today's Bible story, “For just such a time as this.”

At the heart of Esther's story lies those echoing words, words which I hope make your stomach tighten and your breath falter just as much as if Mordecai were saying them to you today-
“Maybe, God put you here, put us here, at this difficult time, for these people, for this challenge, FOR JUST SUCH A TIME AS THIS.”

Maybe God is saying it's time to risk stepping out of the house of fear to dwell in the house of love daring to love like we've never loved before.

Do you remember the song, "The Hokey Pokey?" "You put your right arm in and you put your right arm out. You put your right arm in and you shake it all about. You do the hokey pokey and you turn yourself around. That's what it's all about."

The final verse of that song is, "You put your whole self in, you put your whole self out, you put your whole self in and you shake it all about. You do the hokey pokey and you turn yourself around. That's what it's all about."

There's more truth to that song than we realize.

Maybe putting our whole self in making a total commitment to loving...loving like Jesus...is what life is all about.

Maybe the meaning of life is found when we recognize we are here at this time, we are put on this earth at this time, for just such a time as this – and we discover the true joy in life is when we put our whole selves into what God calls us to do. Great Commandment – Love God, love your neighbor, love others with your whole self, your whole being. Jesus tells us to love God and love others with our whole selves...holding nothing back.

It doesn't mean to love God and love others a little, when we think about it or when it is convenient or comfortable or when it is to our own advantage.

It means to put our whole selves into loving God and others with all that we are and all that we have.

Jesus not only taught us to love God with our whole being, he demonstrated it with his own life...loving so deeply, courageously and generously he was willing even to lay down his own life for the sake of that love.

Life is ultimately all about giving ourselves completely to love...to love like Jesus with our whole being.

William Sloan Coffin said, “The faith journey is the continual invitation to a bigger life which is the continual invitation and conversion from self-absorption and self-protection to daring to give more and more and more of ourselves away in love.”

There’s a daily invitation to put our whole self in... let God shake it all about – that’s what it’s all about...maybe, just maybe, we are here for just such a time as this...a time that calls us to put our whole self in...a time that calls us into a bigger life.

The world outside the church tells us to play it safe, protect and preserve yourself, protect your comfort and security, live a life big enough for yourself and your small circle.

But, if you dare to listen deep enough to your soul, you will hear a more compelling message – live a life big enough for God...live a life big enough for just such a time as this...live a life big enough for God’s love to change you and to change the world. When we put our whole selves in, God works miracles through our lives and transforms the world.

The life of faith is the invitation to move out of the house of fear and into the house of love. When fear is the basis we make our decisions, our lives shrink and become smaller. The invitation of Jesus is the invitation to leave the house of fear and risk stepping into the house of love and allow God’s unconditional love to shake you all about and turn you all around.

In his wonderful book, *God Laughs and Plays*, David Duncan tells the story of a nurse who had a good job and a comfortable life – but she felt this call to a bigger life.

She had that sense, like Esther, that maybe she was here ‘For just such a time as this.’”

With trembling, she accepted an invitation to go to Iraq with a medical group. This was during the time when there was a major health crisis for children after the first Gulf War when the water treatment plants were destroyed and the sanctions on Iraq created a haven for death and disease for hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children.

The nurse’s name is Gerri Hynes. Before her trip, her daughter tried to persuade her that it wasn’t safe and she should stay home.

But, as much as she tried, Gerri couldn’t silence this voice in her calling her to a bigger life, calling her to put her whole self in. So, her daughter told her, “If you have to go, just be completely present wherever you go.” Which is another way of saying – put your whole self in.

Those words returned to Gerri while she was in Iraq in an Iraqi hospital that was virtually bereft of medicine and hope. While her group of doctors and nurses moved quickly from bed to bed, Gerry approached a woman sitting next to her dying child.

Gerri speaks no Arabic. The woman speaks no English. Try to be “present” anyway, Gerri thought to herself – offer my whole self. Gerri looked at the child, then at the mother, and placed her right hand over her own heart. The Iraqi mother placed her right hand over her own heart. Gerri’s eyes and the mother’s eyes simultaneously filled with tears.

The hospital was crowded. Gerri's visitation time was short. She started to move to the next bed, but then remembered her daughter's words: "Completely present – put your whole self in." She and the mother were already crying, their hands over their hearts. There was nothing Gerri could do for the child, despite her medical training.

"How much more present," she wondered, "is it possible to be?" She wanted to run away. But she stepped forward. The nurse without medicine stepped toward the bed of the dying child and inconsolable mother. She then opened her arms which had been crossed expressing her discomfort and she held them out wide with her palms up. The Iraqi mother fell into her arms and they held each other and wept.

See How They Love. For Just Such A Time as This.

May we dare to responds to that call to a bigger life...stepping out of the house of fear and into the house of love.

May we dare to put our whole selves in and allow God's love to change us and the world...shaking us all about....for that's what it's all about!