

Easter 7, Year C: *From Apathy to Artistry: Courage and Christ*
 4pm Jazz Vespers Service at St. Andrew's-Wesley United Church
 With the Anita Eccleston Sextet, Music from The Gala Gardens

John 17:20-21;25-26 (NRSVue)

²⁰ “I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²⁵ Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you, and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them.”

*Note: Preach to (1) Spiritual Life Theme (Ref. 1, Move I), (1) Biblical Text, Christian Tradition (Ref. 2, Move II), (1) Aspect of Jazz Tradition (Ref. 2, Move I), (1) Closing Integrative Reflection (Ref. 2, Move II). I tend to preach a longer first half, a shorter second half.

Song: *The Prayer*

Reflection I, Move I: Apathy, Courage, Rollo May

There's an experience, I think, many of us in this room might have had before. You're in a house of worship, at a university lecture, a company meeting, a community group, a rally, a board or townhall meeting, and the person talking at the front of the room starts off with *a list*. Well intentioned, intelligent or charismatic even, the speaker starts by rattling off a laundry list of the sins of humanity. Let's choose a preacher, for our example, for no particular reason. First, there's plastic in the water that's now in the umbilical cord. Now, the war gets worse in Ukraine as the suffering amounts to unbearable highs in Palestine. Then democracy in the United States (and the rest of the Western world, for that matter) is being tested by a resurgent fascism. Rents get higher by the day, competing with Heaven-bound grocery store prices – the tower of Babel of the Capitalistic God is going to fall, it would seem. Drugs kill the traumatized, oppressed and hurting

in our streets. Young men the world over are retreating from society to hide in their bedrooms, just as the violent assault against women's rights, queer rights of recent memory begins to accelerate. "God is dead," some say, while others invoke the power of the Most High to push the already low even further down still. The person at the front of the room keeps *listing*, listing with such truth and tenacity that your attention wanders, your posture slumps, and your mind begins to think of any mundane grace that will spare you: dishes, the children, homework, an unanswered email, taxes, all begin to take centre stage. Maybe you care about some of those issues. Afterall, who wants to live in a world without the bees? But more than likely, if you're anything like me, the feeling we sometimes feel in such moments is more than overwhelm, more than tiredness. Apathy, literally meaning "without suffering" in Greek,¹ describes a feeling beyond emotion – beyond the core human experience of compassion that quite literally means suffering together,² to a state beyond emptiness. While one source describes apathy as "freedom from suffering" on the one hand, it is also equally described apathy as a "passionless existence," on the other.³ Speaking to the sheer volume of the collective problems we share, the list goes on and on, a path to an apathetic hell paved with nothing but good intentions (as a preacher, I would know).

Lily Rothman, journalist and managing editor at TIME Magazine, captures the feeling in the title of an article from April of 2022 called, "Apathy Crisis: It's Harder Than Ever to Care About Anything."⁴ And doesn't it seem just so? For many of us, it's harder than ever to care about anything – especially for those of us from the West, despairing in the midst of unparalleled affluence and social isolation from one another as from the rest of the world. Ours is not a

¹ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/apathy>.

² <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=compassion>.

³ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/apathy>.

⁴ <https://time.com/6160337/hard-to-care-about-anything/>.

problem of the challenges at hand – we have ample resources, educated people with hearts called to action, the possibility to reverse course on anyone of the aforementioned issues at hand, but a challenge of apathy, of rousing courage to face despair instead of allowing the vacuum of apathy to overtake the heart.

“Courage is not the absence of despair; it is, rather, the capacity to move ahead *in spite of despair*,”⁵ says the late Rollo May, an influential pioneer of existential psychotherapy who originally practiced as a Christian minister. The solution, May suggests, is not to care about everything, but to have the courage to create in the face of despair:

Nor is the courage required mere stubbornness – we shall surely have to create with others. But if you do not express your own original ideas, if you do not listen to your own being, you will have betrayed yourself. Also, *you will have betrayed our community in failing to make your contribution to the whole*. A chief characteristic of this courage is that it requires a centeredness within our own being, without which we would feel ourselves to be a vacuum. The “emptiness” within corresponds to an apathy without; and apathy adds up, in the long run, to cowardice. That is why we must always base our commitment in the center of our own being, or else no commitment will be ultimately authentic.”⁶

For May, such courage is “not a virtue or value among other personal values like love or fidelity. It is the foundation that underlies and gives reality to all other virtues and personal values.”⁷

Courage invites us to be moved to action through contemplation of our individual and collective expressions of apathy that are rooted in the very real desperate nature of the world, and then to act from the centre of our being – the very place that God resides, by using the gifts we have been given, so as to act in a spirit of empathy and compassion. It’s harder than ever to care about anything. But the task is to care about *something*; the *something* that God places on each one of our hearts as our courageous task to create in solidarity with humanity, with creation, with the Divine.

⁵ May, *The Courage to Create*, 12. Author’s emphasis.

⁶ May, *The Courage to Create*, 13. My emphasis.

⁷ May, *The Courage to Create*, 13.

Reflection I, Move II: Judas, Jesus, Courage

Consider the following vignette. Jesus is in Jerusalem. The city is on high alert. The festival of Passover is practically at hand. Jesus is reclining at the dining table with his disciples. The disciples don't know it yet, but this is the last supper before Jesus will be arrested, tried, and executed. Jesus knows that Judas will betray him, that Peter will deny him, that the throngs of people who clamoured to see him only days before will abandon him once the authorities will get involved. He knows that he is going to die. He offers a closing speech to the disciples – after which he is almost immediately apprehended by the civil and religious authorities. So, in between dinner and his impending arrest, Jesus offers a closing word and prayer to the disciples and to God. His is a situation of despair and apathy, if ever there was one. Betrayal. Denial. Death abounding. Yet instead of despairing, Jesus says the following at the end of his address:

I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me...Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them.⁸

He offers a word of solidarity in the face of tyranny, a vision of oneness where the diversity of all people is brought into relationship with God through the power of love. It's not a contrite, rose-coloured vision either, full of kitsch and cliché. "This is my commandment," Jesus says, "love one another as I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends."⁹ And so he does. Jesus faces the apathy, despair, and cruelty of the world with courage,

⁸ John 17:20-21; 25-26, NRSV(ue).

⁹ John 15:12-13, NRSV(ue).

with a fullness of heart¹⁰ that inspires the people to new forms of loving and creating alongside God.

Interlude: *Sunflowers, Golden Hour (speak a note of Ukraine, of bathing in light)*

Reflection II, Move III: Jazz and the courage to create

Writing in 1975 at the tail end of the economic depression of the mid '70's that was caused by war, economic inflation, poor government policy, resource wars, and tampering with currency (if that sounds familiar), Rollo May outlines several pathways to confront societal and personal apathy. Facing issues like the Watergate scandal, a collusion between Christian nationalism and neoliberalism, and the disenchantment of youth due to the onslaught of new technologies and the mixed social implications of the 1960's, May wanted to offer people a tangible methods to find courage within themselves so as to continue to create. First, May suggests, we need physical courage – a courage that “will neither run rampant in violence nor require our assertion of egocentric power *over* other people.”¹¹ This is what he calls, “a courage of the body: the use of the body not for the development of musclemen, but for the cultivation of sensitivity. This will mean the development of the capacity to listen with the body.”¹² From music to conversation, somatic body treatments to sex, from the flesh to the soul, May suggests that such physical courage “will be a valuing of the body as a means for empathy with others, as expression of the self as a thing of beauty and as a rich source of pleasure.”¹³ This, May suggests, is not only personal, but is for the whole of the “new society toward which we are moving.”¹⁴ If we think of

¹⁰ May, *The Courage to Create*, 13.

¹¹ May, *The Courage to Create*, 15. Author's emphasis.

¹² May, *The Courage to Create*, 15.

¹³ May, *The Courage to Create*, 15.

¹⁴ May, *The Courage to Create*, 15.

the jazz tradition, this is deeply embodied in the artist as they stand before their experience, their society, and in the presence of the Spirit – the Spirit who gifts us this life and tasks us to create alongside God. Jesus, as an artist, carried the people to the Cross with him, a physical courage that saw the intermeshing of life, death, and resurrection. He listened. He cultivated sensitivity. He carried us to death and lifted us beyond.

Secondly, May invites us to moral courage, which he says “has its source in such identification through one’s own sensitivity with the suffering one’s fellow human beings.”¹⁵ He toys with the idea of calling moral courage “perceptual courage” as “it depends on one’s capacity to *perceive*, to let one’s self see the suffering of other people. If we let ourselves experience the evil, we will be forced to do something about it.”¹⁶ By choosing not to see, we block off our perception of the pain of the other allowing us to rest in cowardice and apathy; “I did not want to become involved,” thus becomes the prevailing form of excuse. Great artistry, from Coltrane to Christ, invites us to stare deeply into the suffering of the other *and to be moved to do something about it*. Great artistry shines a light on the world as it is, and then orients us toward God’s intention for creation. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; but the kind of peace I give you is not like the world’s peace.”¹⁷ This is a peace that cannot turn away from suffering.

Third, May suggests that we need social courage, “the courage to relate to other human beings, the capacity to risk one’s self in the hope of achieving meaningful intimacy. It is the courage to invest one’s self over a period of time in a relationship that will demand increasing openness.”¹⁸ Social courage requires that we face two dual fears, the first of which was labeled as

¹⁵ May, *The Courage to Create*, 17.

¹⁶ May, *The Courage to Create*, 17.

¹⁷ John 14:27, The Inclusive Bible.

¹⁸ May, *The Courage to Create*, 17.

the “life fear” by Otto Rank. This is “the fear of living autonomously,” which is based in the fear of abandonment and which manifests as unhealthy forms of dependency.¹⁹ The life fear causes us to over rely on one another, driving us towards conformity, lack of diversity, and loss of independence. Secondly, we are invited to face the “death fear.” “This is the fear of losing one’s self and one’s autonomy, the fear of having one’s independence taken away.”²⁰ When acting out of the death fear, we become hardened toward intimacy, rabid individualists that fear all forms of unity, incapable of feeling compassion for the other. In order to grow as individuals and as a society, we must confront both of these fears by participating in ourselves and “in other selves.”²¹ This is at the heart of Jesus’ prayer that, “they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...”

Reflection II, Move IV: Conclusion

Finally, we need creative courage – the courage to reach past despair, apathy, and death,²² towards the discovering of “new forms, new symbols, new patterns on which a new society can be built.”²³ Like Jesus, we lift up ancient stories and breathe new life into them, by illuminating from the centre from the margins. We listen to Queer voices. Indigenous voices. The voices of artists and addicts. The voices of non-conformists and the marginalized, the wounded and traumatized. This is the path of Christ in action. But not only are we called to listen, we are tasked to create as each of us are able: “you too must bear witness,” says Jesus, “for you’ve been with me from the

¹⁹ May, *The Courage to Create*, 18.

²⁰ May, *The Courage to Create*, 18.

²¹ May, *The Courage to Create*, 19.

²² May, *The Courage to Create*, 25.

²³ May, *The Courage to Create*, 21.

beginning.”²⁴ Yes, it may very well be harder than ever to care about anything, says Rothman, but we are called to care about something. Caring for the people, for all creation, Jesus lifted us from death and moved us toward life. Each of us is tasked to face the same despair and apathy of the world that Jesus faced and to create with courage in ways that multiply empathy and compassion. From the quilter to the teacher, the preacher to the musician, the doctor to the single mom, the cook to the migrant worker, we are all called to create. May we be blessed to live with the courage of Christ to create as we have been each called by God. May it be so. Amen.

Song: *Busy Bees* (a note about busy bees, please)

²⁴ John 15:27. The Inclusive Bible.