Address for the Maine Council of Churches
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Courage Is Contagious

Hello, dear friends of the Maine Council of Churches.

My heartfelt thanks to the Reverends Field, Cartwright, and Hewes, and to all in leadership of the Council for the invitation to be with you tonight. To be in your presence means more than I can say.

For my address, I'd like to begin with these words of Scripture, found in the Twelfth Chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews:

Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith . .
Hebrews 12:1-2.

When my colleague Bishop Thomas Brown of the Episcopal Diocese of Maine called last spring to extend your invitation, he didn't have to work hard to persuade me to say yes. He gave me a hard sell anyway, telling me that the Maine Council of Churches was one of the most important and consistent collective voices of moral courage in the state. What's more, he told me that those affiliated with the Council—the affiliate judicatories, associate congregations, and the Council leaders themselves—walk their talk, embodying a Christian witness rooted in love of God and love of neighbor.

I didn't tell him this, but he had me at hello, because I already had some sense of who you are. Last January, I was in Minneapolis, my hometown, responding to the call for clergy across the country to bear witness to the federal government's *Operation Metro Surge,* when another federal anti-immigrant initiative, *Operation Catch of the Day* (even the name is dehumanizing), was launched here. In both states, the goal was not only to detain and deport as many immigrants as possible, but to create a culture of fear and intimidation. As in Minnesota, the faith communities, civic organizations, and mutual aid societies of Maine rose up in opposition, shining the brightest possible light on the cruel actions and dishonest rhetoric coming from federal immigration authorities. And as in Minnesota, the people of Maine helped compel the federal government to back away from the brazen illegalities of those operations.

With less theatrics but equal impact, anti-immigrant policies and practices continue, here and across the country. ICE has detained more people in Maine this year than in the previous two years combined, and the vast majority of them have no criminal record. And your determination to stand alongside your immigrant neighbors also continues, in ways large and small.

I am here tonight to honor and give thanks for you, and for countless others across the state of Maine who refuse to look away, and who show up for your immigrant neighbors with love and courage.

You show your love and courage by meeting daily needs, bringing food and medicine to those afraid to leave their homes or who have lost their work.

You show it by being physically present. You have put your bodies where your neighbors were most at risk: lining up near the exits of businesses so immigrant workers wouldn't face agents alone. You have held vigils at the Cumberland County Jail, where ICE detainees were held.

You show it by providing information, legal help, and rapid response. Faith groups helped build the Maine ICE Watch network for reporting ICE activity and getting help to those directly affected. And you helped pass state laws that keep local police out of immigration enforcement, require judicial warrants in schools and libraries, and protect renters' private information.

And you show it in public mourning and witness. When Johan Sebastián Durán Guerrero was killed in Biddeford this July, a young father who had left home for work that morning, you gathered to mourn him publicly. At Spring Point Ledge Lighthouse, clergy centered their witness on the words of Exodus: "You shall not oppress the stranger." You called for accountability, and you urged officials to return Mainers you believe were unlawfully detained.

Beneath all of this, as the Rev. Jane Field has said many times, is the conviction shared across our traditions that as people of faith we are to welcome the stranger.

Here are some of the photos she sent me of your courage in action.

[Photos]

Everything I have to say to you this evening is in service to a simple idea: courage is contagious.

By being who you are and doing what you feel called to do, you have become beacons of courage and hope, inspiring others by your efforts. Across the country, we are seeing how a Christian witness rooted in mercy is experienced by many as water in the desert for parched souls—as if it were something new. It's not new, but it has been overshadowed by a version of Christianity that has aligned itself with the rise of authoritarianism. It has the louder megaphone at the moment and huge amounts of money behind it. That alignment is also nothing new; Christianity has been used to justify all manner of cruelty at other times in our history.

The good news is that the most effective antidote to the loudest voices repeating things that aren't true isn't becoming louder ourselves. The best antidote is living in such a way that people know us, as Jesus said, by our love. In the words of the late sociologist of

religion Robert Bellah: "Our greatest contribution to the world as Christians is, by God's grace, to try to be who we are."

Your offering, and mine, is to be who we are and to do what we believe it looks like to follow Jesus in our time.

I'd like to explore with you tonight how courage spreads and takes on collective form. Let me begin another virtual to that is closely linked to courage, which is hope. You rarely find one without the other.

The question I am most often asked in public settings these days is, "Bishop, what gives you hope?" It's a fair question, given all that we are facing. Hope is essential to a life of courage, and so how we understand hope matters a great deal in the times we're in.

At the most basic level, hope is our desire for certain outcomes or possibilities to be realized in the future. We're understandably disappointed when those outcomes don't come to pass. When what we hoped for really matters to us, the disappointment can be devastating. We speak of losing hope, of having our hopes dashed. There's no getting around the pain of that.

That's when we need to tap deeper wells, in search of a more resilient hope that enables us to persevere in the face of adversity and disappointment. This hope, in the words of the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu, gives us eyes to see glimpses of light amid the darkness, and when we see no light at all, to trust that light still exists. This hope does not deny difficulty or danger, nor does it minimize disappointment and loss, but it is not stopped by any of those things.

The great naturalist and environmental advocate Jane Goodall described this hope as "humanity's survival trait." Without it, she said, we will perish. Those who lose hope grow apathetic and do nothing. Those who live and act from hope in the hardest times are the ones who help create the conditions in which the things we all long for can, indeed, come to pass.

There is a dimension to hope, then, that is akin to a spiritual practice: an intentional commitment to be a hope-bearer through thick and thin. The practice of hope has become increasingly important to me as I get older, because the last thing the generations coming up behind those of us who are elders need is our cynicism and despair. We need to be wind in their sails—holding fast to all that is good, providing places of respite and encouragement, giving sacrificially of our time and resources, and keeping the light of faith burning, just as our spiritual forebears did for us. We need to pour hope into rising generations.

There is also, for me, a dimension of resistance to the practice of hope: a choice I make every day to live in hope no matter what, and to stand firm, to the best of my ability, no matter what.

We can't keep this deeper hope alive on our own—I know that I can't—and thankfully, we don't have to. As the question "What gives you hope?" suggests, this deeper hope

comes to us as a gift. Our interpretive lens is theological: the giver of this deeper hope is God. But you don't need to be a person of faith to experience the gift of hope, which, in my mind, is a mark of the giver's generosity. Hope can rise inexplicably from within, through the daily blessings we all too easily overlook, and most consistently and powerfully, through the example of other people who refuse to succumb to cynicism and despair.

Which brings us back to courage, and the simple observation that, like hope, courage is contagious. It is one of the Holy Spirit's many gifts, working in and through us, accomplishing far more than we could ask for or imagine. Courage is also an innate, God-given attribute of our species, enabling us to take small brave steps, and sometimes enormous leaps. It is a capacity we can cultivate and strengthen through practice. And it is communal, passing through and among us like electricity. We draw hope and courage from one another.

I once heard a radio interview with the novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson, one of the great literary inspirations of my life. The journalist asked what gave her hope. As she responded, it was immediately apparent in her tone and manner of speaking that she was not a woman easily shaken.

"I often remind people," she said, "that we are a peculiar species, with a long history of doing injury to ourselves and to one another. But just as there was no reason to throw up our hands during the Thirty Years War, I don't see any reason to do so now."

I confess that her reference to the Thirty Years War, a brutal 17th-century European conflict, took me by surprise. Her point was that if you're looking for reasons to give up on humankind, there was ample justification for doing so long before the atrocities of our time.

Equally true, and more important: if you are looking for something to give you hope, there is always reason for hope.

Robinson was unequivocal: our hope lies, as it always has, in the example of other people throughout history and in our time who, inspired by God's grace, refuse to give up on what is best in us. Sometimes, to our amazement, we are the ones carrying hope for another, even when we don't feel it ourselves.

What is it, do you suppose, about someone else's courage that inspires us to be brave?

I think it touches something deep within us, because they embody what we know to be true or what we hope for, and they show us by their example that it's possible to live according to that truth. As I was preparing for the inaugural prayer service nearly two years ago, I read about a group of Roman Catholic bishops in California who took a strong stand in support of migrants in their communities. Their courage to say what we all knew to be true—that the vast majority of migrants and refugees are not dangerous criminals, but active, contributing members of our society—inspired me to say the same.

That so basic a sermon, not unlike what is preached from this pulpit and countless others every Sunday, would be a source of hope for many says far less about the sermon than about who we are as a nation. I'm not minimizing the sermon, but you know as well as I do that the most important ways courage is learned, practiced, and passed along don't make headlines and news cycles. Nor is one sermon or speech consequential on its own. It matters only to the extent that it is linked to a life of integrity, faithfulness, and sacrificial love, and to communities and movements dedicated to a higher purpose.

Our hope lies, as it always has, in the dogged, determined courage of people like you and me, who, inspired by God's grace, refuse to give up on what is best in us.

A few final thoughts:

First, it matters that we stand not only against something, but for something. In a culture saturated with fear and contempt, we need to know what alternative vision and values we choose to live by.

This morning my husband Paul and I took a walk in the Portland neighborhood where we're staying. As we walked, we kept coming across lawn signs that say "Unwavering Dignity," alongside a person's first name: Cynthia, James, Jose. Searching the project's website, I learned that the signs bear the first names of people lost to the opioid epidemic in the past year. Each one is a quiet, public reminder that these lives were loved and that they mattered.

It's a powerful expression of honoring the dignity of every person. There are others.

I have been influenced of late by the work of Tim Shriver and Arthur Brooks who believe that the only viable alternative to the culture of contempt that conspires to keep us all outraged and at each other's throats is a firm, unwavering commitment to treat every person, no matter who they are or what they stand for, with dignity.

Tim Shriver is a co-founder of an organization called UNITE. Several years ago, UNITE created what it calls the Dignity Index, an eight-point scale that measures speech from the most contemptuous, a One, to speech with the greatest dignity, an Eight. The turning point comes between Four and Five–Four and below are statements of increasing contempt. Statements Five and above move us in the direction of dignity.

A Level Four statement mocks and attacks the other side's background, beliefs, commitments, competence, or performance. The subtext is: We're better than those people. They don't really belong. They're not one of us.

Wheras a Level Five statement is open to the other side's point of view and respectfully explains its own goals, views, and plans. The subtext is: The other side has a right to be here and a right to be heard. They belong here, too.

To give you a sense of the trajectory in both directions, moving down four, a Level Three statement attacks the other side's moral character, not just their competence. We're the good people and they're the bad people. It's us versus them.

Conversely, a Level Six statement sees it as a welcome duty to work with the other side to find common ground and act on it. We always talk to the other side, searching for the values and interests we share.

One of the great lessons of spending time with the Dignity Index is what is known as the Mirror Effect. At first, it seems like a great tool for evaluating other people's speech and pointing out their contemptuous language. Over time, we begin to hear and evaluate our own speech, and to recognize how much contempt we have internalized without realizing it. I can assure you that once you've heard the difference between contempt and dignity as it comes out of your own mouth, you can't unhear it. And that changes you, and the ways you want to speak to others, no matter what they are saying.

Let me be clear about what dignity does not mean. It does not mean silence in the face of injustice. Earlier tonight I called the name of a federal operation dehumanizing, and I meant it. Dignity asks us to name harm truthfully and plainly, without stripping anyone of their humanity: not the immigrant family, not the agent at the door, not the official whose policies we oppose.

The premise of the Index is that the only antidote to contempt is dignity, just as the only antidote to hatred is love. As Dr. King taught us, darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. And contempt cannot drive out contempt.

Second, sometimes simply holding steady in turbulence is an act of moral courage.

I've been ordained for nearly 40 years, and for much of my time as a parish priest, one of the most divisive and defining issues in our church, and the country at large, was the full acceptance of LGBT persons, including their sacramental and civil right to marry. For years, the most effective strategy for those opposed to same-gender marriage was to amend state constitutions to define marriage as between a man and a woman.

When I served in Minnesota, the prevailing wisdom was that if such an amendment were put to a public vote, it would pass, because the majority of voting Minnesotans opposed same-gender marriage. The only body keeping such an amendment off the statewide ballot was the Minnesota State Senate.

In 2007, I remember standing in the Capitol with a gathering of those in favor of same-gender marriage, when its becoming a reality seemed like a far-off dream and a constitutional amendment against it seemed far more likely. At that rally, one of our state senators, Scott Dibble, rose to speak. He said something to the effect of: "We just need to hold steady and keep this proposed amendment off the ballot for another five years. By then the tide will have turned in our favor. I'm sure of it."

As he spoke, I knew he was right. Our task was to hold steady, quietly and firmly holding on to what we knew to be true. Exactly five years later, in 2012, when the so-called marriage amendment finally reached the ballot, it failed—the same year same-gender marriage was legalized here in Maine. It failed because of a statewide campaign of people talking to their neighbors and friends, making public service announcements, and communicating a celebration of diversity rather than a fear of it. And it paved the way for legislation legalizing same-gender marriage in Minnesota the following year.

Courage is contagious.

I think a lot about Senator Dibble's words now, and about the importance of holding steady. It's difficult to read or listen to the news, for each day brings a fresh shock of something that would have seemed impossible to some of us only a few years ago. Resisting this political and social tsunami requires all the courage and hope we can muster.

We need each other, and we need countless quiet and heroic efforts to protect as many people as possible and preserve as much as possible, so that we can rebuild when the tide turns. For the tide will turn, not through wishful thinking, but because we held steady.

Finally, a word of wisdom from the Quaker author and educator Parker Palmer, who once said: "You can learn a lot about people by figuring out who they mean when they say the word 'we.'"

He said this in 2002, as we were dealing with the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in the aftermath of 9/11. He was encouraging us to keep company with strangers, to welcome them, and to celebrate their presence in our communities.

The truth is that we, as a nation, are capable of being one of the most welcoming and expansive on the planet, and one of the most hostile and closed. Both tendencies run through our history and our culture.

You know this history well. Just off Spring Point Ledge Lighthouse, where some of you gathered this summer to mourn Johan Sebastián Durán Guerrero lies an island that once served as a federal immigration quarantine station. “Ellis Island of the North,” they called it. The question of who belongs to our "we" has been asked on these shores for generations.

Looking back, we are never proud of the moments when we draw the circle tight. We are never proud of the people we become, the behaviors we justify, and the things we say when our "we" becomes small and self-protective. We are always better people, and a better nation, when we have an expansive "we" that embraces the diversity and beauty of all humankind.

Let me end where I began, with my heartfelt thanks, and with encouragement to hold steady in what you know to be true.

Keep being people who refuse to give up on the best of us, who refuse to meet contempt with contempt, who honor every person's God-given dignity.

And when you lose hope, as we all do, that's when we need to dig deep, look around, and remember that the courage and hope we need flow through and among us. It is mysterious; it is communal; it is contagious.

There is always someone who is still standing. Look for them. Look for your beacons of hope. Then look within yourself, and know that you are among them.