

[PRAYER] Believe it or not, I am trying to get a little bit of a life this summer. After three years of school, and two years of serving a church, I am realizing that, whoa, I need a little balance in my life! Well, some of that balance will start to disappear this fall, when I go back to school half time, but it's nice to enjoy it while I can!

So, in addition to serving you and our community, I make time for swimming, biking, hiking, and relaxing with my family. We love the movies, and Monday matinees in the summer have been a nice way for us to relax together. This Monday we had a chance to see "Dunkirk," the story of how hundreds of thousands of British troops, defeated by the Nazis in 1940, were trapped on the beaches of Dunkirk in France, hoping to escape from the beaches back to England. Their navy ships were easy targets for Nazi planes and torpedoes, and so it seemed that only a handful of troops would make it home alive. But then, hundreds of small private boats streamed across the English Channel, the narrow stretch of ocean between England and France. More than 330,000 troops were rescued through the courageous efforts of soldiers and citizens.

Even so, this was a humiliating defeat for the British. Their powerful army had been beaten badly. A Nazi invasion was expected at any time. It was at this incredibly dark and dangerous moment that Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister of Britain, spoke to his people.

Churchill's speech was amazing - he told them the full truth of what had happened, but he also told them a new story about how they would fight this war. Churchill saw the character of the people who fought desperately against their enemy, and who made this rescue possible. They may have been defeated, but he told them how they fought with character. Churchill then used this story of courage and valor to start to tell the story of how his nation would respond to the enemy at its doorstep: "We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender."

It was a powerful speech, a speech that rallied a nation from the edge of complete defeat, a speech that offered them the courage to fight a war that was about to destroy many of their homes, their cities, their churches, their schools, and hospitals. That courage was perhaps their strongest resource - a resource that helped them to move from defeat by their enemy to conquering their enemy.

Who are our enemies today? How do we find the courage to conquer them? Answering this question is, in many ways, the essence of our faith journey into Christian discipleship. We all face challenges. We all face things that at times make us feel that we are on our own Dunkirk beaches, our backs to the sea, our enemy surrounding us, defeat a seeming certainty, and hope a feeble commodity. How we tell

our story in those moments makes all of the difference. Churchill's speech gives us a good example of how to tell our story in the middle of our challenges. He knew that a liberating story of courage, one that can help us to conquer our enemies, requires us to be honest about what is not working. He spoke honestly about the mistakes that the British army and their allies had made, condemning no one, but noting where they had fallen short through complacency, where old plans didn't fit new circumstances, where trust in allies turned out to be misplaced. In other words, our willingness to deceive ourselves can be our own worst enemy.

Then, Churchill praised the courage and dedication of everyone who was fighting valiantly for their country, and called upon them to put aside all doubts about the worthiness of their mission, and their ability to fight for it. He didn't promise victory - he promised that everyone's efforts in the fight for victory had value, no matter what. The courage to conquer comes from being completely dedicated to victory - no matter how things turn out.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, the apostle reveals a similar roadmap to the courage to conquer through Christian faith. First, Paul asks Christians to take a deep breath, and let the Holy Spirit of God to speak God's truth to us in our moments of deep vulnerability. We cannot conquer our enemies, most especially the enemies within us, until we have breathed in the breath of God as our most intimate and powerful friend, when we are weakest before our friend. Paul says, "...that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words...the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." Paul sees that we must first let go of our separation from God, and let God into our hearts, to make room for God's call to God's purpose - the victory of God's love over all of creation. It is a call and a purpose wrapped in God's grace and truth, a call that strips away our self-deception about our strengths and our weaknesses, a call that makes us realize that we need resources far greater than our own to fight a battle in which our self-deception is our own worst enemy.

Then, like Churchill, Paul turns the story of our vulnerability into a story of courage, the courage to conquer the evil that threatens not just our world, but our very souls, souls for which God gave his very life on the cross in our savior, Jesus Christ. For Paul, the key to us finding this courage to conquer is to surrender to the one thing that will lead us to victory: loving and listening to the God who first loved us, before we were even born. Paul says, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." Surrendering to the supreme power of God's love IS Christian victory! When we struggle through life, and hold this victory in our hearts, no matter what the outcome of doing this might be, we can say with a joyful heart, "To God be the glory!" We are liberated from the doubt of how our story might turn out, as we realize that our story has become part of the story of God's victory for all time. It is then that our true courage as children of God can bloom, like the mustard seed that blooms in Jesus' parable today into a huge and dominating bush, a bush which conquers everything around it, and invites life to fly

into it, like the birds, as the world's story becomes God's story.

I have a good friend at school, about my age, who has been through several operations for his joints. A few months ago, just before our final exam week, his thigh bone snapped, right at his hip socket. He was devastated by this setback, and he was frightened by the prospect of a surgery that had a very uncertain outcome. Truly he was at his Dunkirk, searching for the depth of faith and trust in God to get him through this operation.

And it was then that God led me towards Paul's closing words in Romans to help him find the courage to face this operation, and to conquer his fears through faith. Paul says, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Surrendering to the supreme power of God's love IS Christian victory! Our willingness to be convinced of that victory, in all of our life, not matter what, even at the most frightening and defeating moments of our lives, is the key to our victory over everything that separates us from that love. We cannot be conquered by death, pain, evil or sin, when we surrender to Christ. Our story becomes part of God's unkillable story. My friend took this verse into his heart, and he was at complete peace.

My friend's operation was a success, and he returned to his studies, but most important of all, Christ had the victory over his heart. He had found in Christ the courage to conquer his enemies of fear and doubt, because, as Paul says, "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." When we let God's love conquer us, we win! When we let God's love conquer us, the world wins! When we let God's love conquer us, God's story wins. And God's victory, in the end, is the only story that matters.

Our church, our community, our families, and ourselves - we all face important challenges. We can all be tempted to surrender to our enemies in facing those challenges, especially the enemies within us. No outcome from surrendering to Christ's victory through faith is certain, in terms of our individual stories. But in surrendering to God's story, in finding the courage to let God's story conquer all stories, we are more than conquerors - we are God's people who fight for God's victory, already people with eternal value and merit, already becoming part of God's victory. God's love conquers! May it conquer us today, and always, forever, for God's sake, for our sake, and for the world's sake. Amen.