

CHAPLAIN JOHN GALBREATH –BESIDE THE STILL WATERS
Memorial Day Weekend May 27, 2018 –Psalm 23: 1-6
The Church of the Covenant

There are heroes all around us. Memorial Day Weekend is a great time to acknowledge that fact. I love when I serve a church getting to know previous pastors. Especially, if some of the former pastors are still alive I like to correspond with them and get to know them and even invite them to return and preach. It is selfish, I suppose. I get to learn a lot about the churches I serve from the pastors who served those churches. I had the high privilege of serving Westminster Presbyterian Church in Upper St. Clair as interim pastor and I must admit that some of my interest in the position was getting to know its great founding pastor, The Rev. Dr. John Galbreath. He had begun the church as a new church development after WWII and built it into one of the largest churches in our denomination. How had he accomplished this? Who was the man whom God chose to use to do such a mighty work?

I discovered a loose leaf notebook of his spiritual autobiography in the church library entitled, “A Good Day”. There were supposed to be four copies but three were missing, so this was the last one. I read it with care, seeking to discern what had made this pastor a great pastor.

When he was in high school he and a friend planned to take a bike trip across Europe one summer. His best friend was Jewish. The wars and rumors of war were breaking out all across Europe. There was the rise of Nazi Germany and of Fascism in places like Italy as well. It was dangerous and war was imminent and could break out at any time. His friend cancelled out at the last minute. But John Galbreath forged ahead. What kind of 16 year old would forge ahead by himself and do what others would not do? I think he possessed courage, courage of his convictions. What he saw impacted him for the rest of his life. He was particularly distressed with the rise of the Hitler youth movement. Evil must be opposed with good. He came home a changed young man. Courage makes a difference.

He went on to become an ordained Presbyterian Minister and then a Marine chaplain in WWII. He was one of the chaplains who hit the beach at Iwo Jima, one of the bloodiest conflicts in the Pacific theater. He was the kind of chaplain who was out in front with his men. And of course as bullets sailed around him, he was unarmed because chaplains chose to be unarmed. He was in the thick of the fighting, encouraging and praying and comforting the wounded and dying. Imagine being 24 years old and seeing all that. He is pictured in what I refer to as the “second most famous picture from Iwo Jima”. The most famous is of course the men raising the American flag on the top of Mt. Suribachi. It has been made into a monument in Washington, D.C. across the Potomac in Arlington, VA. But the second most famous photograph was of a chaplain comforting a dying man. It was captioned, “Beside Still Waters” from Psalm 23. It was John Galbreath ministering to a dying man and giving him strength and courage at the last. What kind of 24 year old could do that? What kind of pastor could pastor in the thick of battle? How could he remain so calm under fire? I think he had courage, courage of his convictions.

He came home a changed man and pastor. He strode across a large cornfield in 1946 next to route 19 that not too long before had been largely unpaved and meandering south toward Washington. And in that cornfield he envisioned a church. He knocked on doors in the new community, he visited every person he could, he invited them to church. I always used him as an example to young seminarians when I was an administrator at Pittsburgh Seminary; if you are an awesome pastor, and visit your people, and visit your community, and they know you love them and they love you, then there isn't

anything in ministry you cannot do. It took courage to start a church from scratch. It took courage to be engaged in his community when that was not the popular thing to do. It took courage to march at Selma for Civil Rights in 1965. But that courage was what built Westminster into a 2,800 member church, one of the largest in our denomination. It took courage of his convictions and love for his people. How could one man, one pastor, do all that? Courage makes a difference.

I decided it would be a shame if his story were lost for future generations so I contacted him and we re-edited his spiritual autobiography together, and I found money from donors to publish his book in a hardback edition. We had a great on-going correspondence. Many telephone calls. And we brought him back to preach and discuss his life and his book. And selfishly I got to have some long talks with a man I had long-admired. For all his accomplishments and strength, I also discovered that he was a very modest man. Humble and sort of “aw shucks” about everything. He said he wasn’t a great preacher but when I heard him preach I would disagree. He said he wasn’t a great pastor but there were generations of members in that church that would disagree. He was courageous and humble and man of faith. He stood for what he believed. Courage makes a difference and there are courageous people all around us every day. I was glad we brought him back when we did because about a year later he passed away.

As part of my research I discovered an audio tape of a sermon he preached at Camp Lejuene North Carolina. The Marines had commissioned a stained glass window in the Marine Chapel there of “Beside Still Waters”, depicting John Galbreath comforting the dying Marine on Iwo Jima. Galbreath was asked to preach for the dedication of the window. Galbreath preached to those young people about courage, about facing life unafraid, about running into the face of death with conviction and purpose, how what you believe about life and God makes all the difference, how you can be utterly courageous, fearless, in whatever you face in life because of the Lord who walks by your side. His text was the 23rd Psalm. You can walk through the valley of the shadow of death because of the Good Shepherd who walks by your side. You can have peace in your life, no matter what seeks to harm you like bullets sailing to your left and to your right, because the Good Shepherd will ultimately lead you to still waters, even in the midst of the storm. *“He leadeth me beside the still waters.” (Psalm 23: 2)* And when the chaplain was done with his sermon at first it was quiet and then some young Marine called out BOO-RAH and then the entire chapel burst forth with thunderous applause. Courage had made a difference once again. It always does.

There are men and women all around us who possess that same courage. Some have served and still live. Some have served and died. But when you measure their lives and consider what was the source of their strength, you always find a courage in their convictions, and a strong faith in the Lord, the Living God. May we be such a people once again! Amen and Amen.

**By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!**