

Good morning! I am Laura Witkowski, my pronouns are she/her/hers and I am your Associate Director for Lay Leadership Development of the Michigan Conference. I am incredibly grateful for and humbled by this opportunity. And I just want to say to my fellow laity... Friends, if I can do this here, at Annual Conference, you can surely do this in your local church. Yes?!

I want to tell you a story about a young person within our connection with ordinary courage. Though born in Haiti, Grace was brought to Florida within the first year of her life. She was an only child by birth but not in life. Her parents were beautiful souls who welcomed all people into their home. Anyone needing refuge, however temporary, was loved, fed and offered a place to rest. In college, she felt her education should lead her to do something about injustice and inequality in the world. Grace was inspired into action through the Wesley Foundation at the University of Central Florida where they believe "...love for Christ and one another inspires action in our community."

Like most of us cradle United Methodists getting dragged--I mean brought, brought to church gatherings, Grace experienced this at a young age. Grace's mom was involved in United Methodist Women which ultimately led Grace to be involved. Around 2013, Limitless was a movement within UMW and it was through that Grace attended General Conference 2016. Though General Conference can bring frustration and anxiety a bright spot is the Young People's address. It was here Grace learned of the US-2 Global Mission Fellows program. It is a 24-month service program for young people that includes training, transition into the site they will be serving, and intentional/community living. Grace heard her call. In August 2017 she moved to Detroit to serve at the NOAH Project and at the same time a close friend moved to New York. Grace and her friend spent the month of August talking about their transitions, how they were different, how they were similar. They were in this together and would see each other through it. At the end of that August, Grace's friend left this earthly life too soon, at the age of 22. A few months later, in December a fellow UCF Wesley Foundation freshman student was found dead in her dorm room.

These two back to back deaths of young people were a lot for Grace to process alone in a new city and in a new job. And then, at the end of January 2018, Grace received word that her father had been diagnosed with lung cancer. The cancer was aggressive. The father Grace had loved so much and the beautiful human he was left this earthly life less than 3 months later. How long, O Lord, How long?

Her heart was broken. Her courage was gone. Her faith was shaky. During this time, she fell away from God. Why would God move her to Detroit only to have these tragic events happen? Grace did all she could to put her faith in action. During this time, Grace considered quitting the US-2 program and moving back to Florida.

During the reconstruction of her faith, Grace found courage from within; the courage God had already placed in her. She gained clarity on her calling. And now, Grace uses the term 'hope holding.' The NOAH Project serves homeless persons in Detroit and many of the clients can sometimes find themselves without hope. They need others to 'hold on to their hope' while they get through it. Grace realized she had people around her 'hold her hope' when she could not. When she was ready to receive it, her 'hope holders' gave it back. Grace is finishing up her US-2 assignment and she has been called to the work of a Deacon! She'll be attending Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary and we can only hope we get her back in Michigan!

When you get a group of people into a room and ask them what you need to be a bold and effective leader, you're going to get a laundry list of characteristics. After you've listed the 20 to 30, most will be vague, some will make you roll your eyes and the combination of all of them will be impossible to find in a single person. I rarely see courage or courageous on those lists. And why not? I live in a world of hope and courage. I don't know about you, but it's courage that gets me out of bed every day!

Courage originally meant "heart, innermost feelings, temper." Innermost feelings? That sounds like vulnerability to me. So where did that lead me? You guessed it! Researcher, author, speaker, patron saint of vulnerability, Brené Brown. Her book *Rising Strong* changed my life! If you haven't seen her Netflix special, *The Call to Courage*, you must. Please do it today. I'll even lend you my Netflix password. Anyway, Brené Brown says in her book *The Gifts of Imperfection*, "Over time, this definition (of courage) has changed, and today, courage is more synonymous with being heroic. Heroics is often about putting our life on the line. We've lost touch with the idea that speaking honestly and openly about who we are, about what we're feeling, and about our experiences (good and bad) is the definition of courage." She goes on to say, "Ordinary courage is about putting our vulnerability on the line." This young person, Grace, put her vulnerability on the line by letting others hold on to her hope. Through her pain, continuing to follow Jesus was, in this sense, the courageous thing to do. Grace came back to her faith; she showed up when she couldn't control the outcome. Friends, that is not easy. Looking at courage through this lens is hard. Leaders would much rather be bold by being heroic. That's what all those Avengers movies have shown us! That's way more fun. In her book *Searching for Sunday*, the eloquent, courageous, truth-teller and truly missed, Rachel Held Evans says, "The annoying thing about being human is that to be fully engaged with the world, we have to be vulnerable. And the annoying thing about being vulnerable is that sometimes it means we get hurt." Being vulnerable... that can make life difficult.

Speaking of making life difficult. I did a little extra homework in this particular writing process and I've learned a little bit more about exegesis. I have pages and pages of notes and underlined text and questions and words, so many words. Yikes! Reason number 112 I'm not called into ordained ministry.

Our scripture passage this morning begins after Jesus hears of the killing of John the Baptist, his beloved cousin. It begins after Jesus used five loaves of bread and two fish to feed five thousand. The story continues with Jesus insisting the disciples get in the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side of the lake. I imagine the disciples roll their eyes upon Jesus' insistence, wondering what's next for them. Then, talk about crowd control... Jesus dismisses the 5,000... maybe we can get Jesus to do some of that when we dismiss for meals here. Anyway, Jesus sends the full-bellied crowd home and as happens many times in his ministry - goes alone to pray for the night. He had not been given the chance to grieve the loss of his cousin and after some fellowship with 5,000 people, retreating alone and reconnecting with the Holy One was required for Jesus to get some perspective.

Meanwhile... I love that word, meanwhile. As a super fan of *Hamilton: An American Musical* I hear that word differently now. And now you have 'The Room Where It Happens' running through your head. You're welcome.

Meanwhile...the disciples have been struggling all night to get across the lake in a storm. They weren't afraid in the storm like a previous Matthew storm/boat passage. You know, where Jesus is taking a nap on the boat and calms the sea after being woken up by the disciples. Maybe the disciples were wondering where Jesus was, wondering when he is going to come and calm this wind like he did before, irritated that it is taking them all night to get across this lake against the wind, and likely exhausted.

You all heard my spouse, Matthew, speak last year during the TOM Talks about community building. Well, he is constantly drawn to the water and an avid fisherman. In our 12 years together, I have done everything I can to avoid being on a boat in a storm or even the rain. I think for the most part I have been successful. At least 4 of the disciples were used to being on the water, especially Peter. Like my Matt, Peter had been on the water his whole life, so this trip across the lake wasn't a big deal. He had probably done it thousands of times. Taking all night, against the wind, however, that's kind of intense.

Then comes the big moment! Jesus walks out to them in the storm ON. THE. WATER. The disciples freak out! They scream! They cry out in fear! They thought Jesus was a ghost. They didn't recognize anything about this figure, the face, the voice. Then Jesus says, "Have courage. It is I! Don't be afraid." Some translations say 'take heart' or 'be encouraged' 'I AM.' In the Gospels of Mark and John telling of this story, it ends undramatically with either Jesus getting in the boat and calming the wind, or immediately the boat reached the land. Some say Matthew's telling focuses on what discipleship looks like. It looks like Peter or Grace.

Notice Jesus doesn't say, "everyone come out here, the waters fine! Come follow me!" Well, maybe he would have except impulsive, leap before he thinks, Peter blurts out his request. Peter, also known as Simon Peter, often has stories told of his failures. I mean, come on, he denied knowing Jesus three times. So, you can probably see what's coming in this story before you even get to the end, right? So Peter, the rock, basically demands Jesus prove himself, as if walking on water wasn't enough. "Lord, if it's you order me to come to you on the water." I feel like in this moment Peter had some ordinary courage. I can't imagine he wanted to be vulnerable in front of the disciples, in front of Jesus. He was being open and honest about who he is. Peter had the courage to show up when he didn't know or couldn't control the outcome. He probably paused a beat and said, "This is crazy. I know this can't be done. I'm going to look like an idiot when I fall in the water trying to be like Jesus." Brené Brown found in her years of research on courage that no one could "give an example of courage that did not require uncertainty, risk or emotional exposure" in other words vulnerability. This is totally Peter to me at this moment. His courage to get out of the boat required vulnerability.

Then, when Jesus said "come" he had that moment! 'OMG, I'm on top of the water! Incredible! This is what it feels like to have faith in Jesus. This is amazing!' The euphoria, the joy at the moment must have been a lot for Peter. I'm not sure it's that he took his focus off of Jesus, like so many say. It may be that he never experienced something quite like this and that excitement and joy of his faith and courage to even take that step is what caused him to 'see the strong wind.' My favorite commentary I found about Peter in this moment was "Once in a while, the church needs a few ridiculous people like Peter to go try something that no one in the church thinks we should be doing." Too many of us are staying in the boat where it's safe and watching. Be vulnerable in ways you never have before. Find your ordinary courage, don't be like the other disciples in the boat that day, be like Peter!

On the mornings I drop off our son at school, he is still sure to kiss me goodbye and then I say a series of "Have a great day!" "I love you." "Be kind." "Learn something." Sometimes, I throw in a "make good choices!" just to humor my own self. One morning this Spring, Kasen and I were in the allergist office where we are a couple times a month getting his injections and I was reading a chapter in the book, *If You Want to Walk on Water You Have to Get Out of the Boat*, by John Ortberg. It was the chapter on fear and how Peter experiencing fear might have caused him to fall into the water. The chapter tells several stories of people not wanting to take a leap because we have learned fear over time, through the media, through the government, through our church. Then I got to this, "In addition, many of us

learned about fear in families. What did Mom say when you went out the door to school? It is the rare mom who says, Take risks today. Embrace danger. Look just one way when you cross the street.” Uh, yeah, ok. That’s fair. I have never said any of those things to Kasen. But my Mr. safety son, future OSHA employee could probably use that every once and a while. That morning as I dropped him off I said, “Have a great day! I love you! Be courageous!” Now I probably have to define that for the 7-year-old, but hey, one step at a time.

One take is that Peter’s euphoria or joy in the moment distracted him, not fear or his lack of faith, and in that moment of distraction Peter ‘saw the wind’ and he started to sink. He cried out to Jesus, “Lord, save me!” Immediately, the scripture says, immediately Jesus grabbed him. I don’t picture this as a failure of Peter, I see Jesus saying, “Dude! You had it, you were so close, you were almost there! You of little faith. Maybe next time.” It’s not that Peter didn’t have enough faith or that having more faith would have allowed him to walk to Jesus. He did have enough faith. In case you didn’t notice, the other disciples did even engage! The Rev. Sarah Heath says about this moment, “Jesus meant ‘you of little heart. Why did you doubt yourself? You have enough faith to get better at this.”

Then, of course, the winds are calmed. And then in that stillness, the other disciples, “worshipped Jesus and said, “You must be God’s Son!” Peter already knew that in the chaos. He actually did have enough faith, he just doubted himself, not Jesus.

Courage in leadership is facing an uncertain future (I think everyone in this room knows something about facing an uncertain future) and still stepping out of the boat. Isn’t that what Peter did? I know that’s what Grace is doing. They were in a moment saying, “Jesus, if it’s you invite me out to you.” Again, John Ortberg notes, “The water is where Jesus is.” Getting out of the boat means having that ordinary courage, it means being vulnerable.

In January of 2001, I transferred to the University of Memphis in Tennessee. It was a bit of a culture shock for this white, midwestern, suburban girl. In 2001 Memphis ranked the second most dangerous city in the nation among cities over half a million people. In 2002, it became the most dangerous. Was I trying to get out of West Michigan or what?! Sorry, mom and dad. Whenever people came to visit we always had to go to Beale Street and Graceland. Beale Street is the city center with a ton of restaurants and is closed off to cars a few times a year for the variety of city festivals. Graceland, of course, is the former home of Elvis Presley. I’ve been more times than I’d like to tell you all, and it actually does get old. After about a year in Memphis, I discovered the National Civil Rights Museum. It’s extraordinary. It’s the history of an uprising. It’s an important part of our history in this country. Of course, it doesn’t tell the whole story. Memphis and the United States of America has a deep history of slavery, segregation and racism that plagues us, even today.

The National Civil Rights Museum is located at the Lorraine Motel. Where, 33 years before I moved to Memphis, on April 4, 1968, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. Dr. King, the most visible spokesperson in the civil rights movement in the USA, was in Memphis to support the Sanitation Workers’ Strike of 1968. On February 1 of that year, Echol Cole and Robert Walker were crushed to death in a garbage truck while seeking shelter from the rain. That truck was known to be defective and the city refused to replace it. Furious with their working conditions, which included low pay, no restrooms, no city-issued uniforms, no grievance procedure and being overworked, the workers went on strike from February 12 to April 16. The stories we don’t ever hear about are of the 1,300, mostly black, men and their families. I was struck by this fact – even after visiting the Civil Rights Museum at least 4 times I didn’t know the names of Echol Cole and Robert Walker. This struck me when I received an email

a few months ago from my alma mater. It said, "The Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change at the University of Memphis will host a special event featuring first-hand stories of courage and survival from the women of the 1968 Sanitation Workers Strike."

I certainly perked up after deleting so many emails I receive as an alum. Stories of courage and survival from the women of the 1968 strike! I've been told I'm a new-found feminist, but I think I've always been one, I've just now figured out how to put words to it. If I lived closer, I would have gone. Instead, I did the next best thing, I watched the video series where the stories came from *1300 Men: Memphis Strike '68*. I learned that the wives of these men were the definition of ordinary courage. They put their vulnerability on the line for the sake of real change. They got out of the boat into an uncertain future. They walked on water to Jesus not knowing what the outcome would be for their families.

I'm not sure there was a group of people more vulnerable in 1968 than these sanitation workers' wives. I learned about Savannah Phillips who did have a job for \$32 a week cleaning other people's houses and raising other people's kids. For reference see the movie "The Help." Some did not have a job relied on their husbands small and pitiful wages. The narrator of the video series notes, "Just making ends meet was an underappreciated act of revolution." They made sure their children knew they were loved despite being teased at school for being 'the garbageman's kids.'

When the men went on strike, so did their wives. These women, who were constrained by their gender and color of their skin, fought at their husbands' side. I learned of Helen Turner who attended rallies and handed out pamphlets. I learned about Dorothy Poindexter who fought for a reimagined future for her family. They kissed their men goodbye every morning, not knowing if they'd be home that night. They cared for the husbands who were beaten and tear-gassed while wearing "I AM a Man" protest signs. The women comforted their children following the death of 16-year-old Larry Payne who was shot while unarmed with his hands in the air. Contributor to the video series, Kirsten West Savali writes, "They loved hard. They prayed hard. They took pride in being their wives, creating families that were able to withstand the vicious blows of white supremacy that rained down on them. They didn't do anything audacious enough to be placed in history books. They did what they did because they felt they were born to do it."

If you're hanging out in your boat, whatever that may be and aren't sure how to take that first step. Number 1: ask Jesus to invite you out on the water. Number 2: have conversations with those who have stepped out of the boat. Like Sunnyside and the work they are doing in overcoming systemic racism. Like La Nueva Esperanza who through their district Lay Servant Ministries director hosted a BASIC Lay Servant course in Spanish working to develop leaders in their context! Have conversations with Flint: Asbury who are working in its inner-city community to maintain several community gardens and hoop houses and next are planning on establishing a local café. And the Northern Skies District who through the Lay Academy of Rural Church Ministry are developing leaders in their context! Like Hope UMC near Hastings who dedicated a major portion of their facility for a Day Center for Family Promise of Barry County, working to help homeless and low-income families achieve sustainable independence. Number 3: Take the step!

The wives of the '68 strike, Grace and Peter all had ordinary courage. They faced an uncertain future, put their vulnerability on the line, and had enough faith to say, 'Jesus, ask me to come out on the water.' And they did. The water is where Jesus is; the water is a task too big for us to do alone. Be ridiculous like Peter. Be more like Jesus. Find your ordinary courage. Get out of the boat.

References:

- US-2 Global Mission Fellowship – umcmmission.org/serve-with-us/global-mission-fellows
- NOAH Project - noahprojectdetroit.org
- *The Gifts of Imperfection* by Brené Brown – 2010
- *Rising Strong* by Brené Brown – 2015
- *Brené Brown The Call to Courage* - A Netflix Original Special – 2019
- *Searching for Sunday* by Rachel Held Evans – 2015
- Matthew 14: 22-33 – Versions included: International Children's Bible, Common English Translation, New Revised Standard Version
- *Hamilton: An American Musical Cast Recording* – 2015
- *If You Want to Walk on Water You Have to Get Out of the Boat* by John Ortberg – 2001
- Rev. Sarah Heath, First UMC, Costa Mesa, CA - revsarahheath.com
- *1300 Men: Memphis Strike '68* - The Root & Striking Voices theroot.com/c/1300-men-memphis-strike-68