

“Courage: Strength of Heart”

Date: July 26, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Theme: Courage

Occasion: Virtues series

Texts: Joshua 1:1-3, 5-9; Romans 8:31-39

Courage is one of the few virtues that have never gone out of style. It has always been, and probably always will be, valued in the eyes of both secular society and the community of faith. Courage has often been associated with military action, with soldiers rushing into battle. And while it is true that it takes courage to rush in where others fear to go, soldiers are not the only ones who show courage.

Aren't we all inspired by the police officers or fire-fighters who rush into a dangerous situation, like a fire or an automobile accident, risking their own lives in order to save someone else's. Even more special to us, are the ordinary citizens who come upon such a scene and choose to get involved.

We also see courage every time a woman undertakes the physical rigors and risks of pregnancy and childbirth. We see it in medical staff when they choose to treat people with deadly diseases they themselves could contract. It is seen in every Good Samaritan who stops to render aid. It often happens without a great deal of thought, as our bodies just seem to react to a situation instead of any intellectual decision-making.

We also see courage on display when individuals like John Lewis stand up for civil rights, liberty and justice, even when he knew he would be assaulted by police officers or arrested. It takes courage to oppose injustice. We cannot love, in today's world of extremes, without courage.

And yet, for courage *to be courage*, it cannot stand alone. Ignoring fear and taking risks simply for the sake of an adrenaline rush is *not* virtuous, whether it is an extreme sport or attending a covid-19 party.

Courage needs the other virtues to be considered virtuous. There is a large difference between courage that faces danger for a just, wise and good reason, and mere “guts” that faces danger for any reason at all.

I am reminded of a rather gruesome scene in the movie *Deer Hunter*, about a Vietnam Vet who was dealing with PTSD, and chose to return to Vietnam to gamble with his life, playing Russian roulette for money. True, he faced his fears, but for what a worthless cause. Courage needs the other virtues to keep it a *true* virtue, for there is no virtue in courage for a *malicious* cause, or simply a stupid stunt to put on YouTube.

Biblical courage moves beyond mere physical strength to overcome difficulties; it moves beyond that to relate to the heart. In doing so, courage connects with faith and hope. I love this definition of courage: “Courage is action rooted in the conviction that we are not alone. It is the fruit of a life grounded in a trusting heart.” (Dunnam, page 44)

A child grows in trust and in courage when parents are supportive. A child may stand on the side of the pool frightened to jump in. But if Mom or Dad is in the pool, reassuring him or her that the parent is there for them, then the child’s courage swells and jumps in. The parent doesn't have to rescue the child, but the child has overcome their fear of the water. Their courage has grown, because they knew they were not alone.

The apostle Paul speaks of this *grounding in trust* when he is asked, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress or persecution or famine or peril or the sword?” His answer is connected to faith and courage. “Not one thing! No one! Nothing! For I am convinced that *nothing* will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.”

Biblical courage, Christian courage, means to live with the knowledge that we are not alone. Courage is the faith that rests on the “assurance of

things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1) In other words, through our faith, using our trust in God, God empowers us with a bold heart, which is courage expressed in daily living.

We often see that kind of courage expressed in cancer patients, who accept their diagnosis with calmness, going to their treatment, but putting the outcome in God’s hands. They know the treatment may or may not work, but they are not anxious. They know that nothing can separate them from the love of God, and thus they can take it one day at a time, accepting what each day brings. Their courage is often inspiring to others.

However, it would be a mistake to say that courage means you don’t feel fear. Contrary, courage exists in the midst of our fear. The Bible has repeatedly emphasized this message. The first lesson this morning is a great illustration of that point.

Joshua, one of the bravest characters in the Old Testament, had the responsibility of leading God’s people into the Promised Land. Moses has died and God is instructing Joshua on his new responsibilities. God reminds Joshua *of the promise* of a new homeland, *and then* reminds Joshua to be strong and courageous as he leads his people into battle.

Now, this fact alone doesn’t say much. However, if you look closely at the story we discover that God has to tell Joshua *to be strong and courageous* no less than three times. Joshua must have been afraid or God would not have had to remind him to be courageous that many times.

And here is the crux of the issue. God is not asking for blind courage. Rather, God is asking Joshua *to have* courage, knowing that God will be with him wherever he goes and that God will not fail him or forsake him. God supports Joshua in his fear, empowers him to act and then uses him for God’s purposes. God will do no less with us.

Now listen, the fear we face can be physical, mental, moral, emotional or spiritual. Therefore, courage is required of us in *all* areas of our life. Yet the question remains, where do we get the courage when our fears remain? We believe *it is* hope that gives us the courage to act when we are afraid. Our lives are lived with both fear *and* hope.

Hope is what gives us the courage to do the things we are afraid of doing, because hope is faith that we will prevail; and this faith gives us the power to be victorious. Yet hope is not magical. It doesn't make all the problems go away instantly, be it cancer or war or poverty or racism.

Hope is grounded in the belief that God is already victorious because of what Jesus Christ has done on the cross. Hope is grounded in the belief that we are not alone, but God will be with us in the struggle. We participate in the struggle but we surrender the results to God, believing that *He* will ultimately be victorious.

When our fear tells us we are all alone, hope tells us God is still here and God is on our side. Hope tells us that God is on the side of life, not death; the side of love, not hate; the side of healing, not brokenness; the side of joy, not misery; the side of peace, not war; the side of justice, not oppression.

As Christians, our hope is seen at its absolute peak of triumph in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. For in the resurrection we have our hope in the ultimate victory of Almighty God. With this hope, we can live with courage. We can even sacrifice and we can risk our lives for others and for the sake of justice and righteousness. Why? - Because, the victory belongs to God. Have courage, my friends. Amen!

This sermon borrows heavily from *The Workbook on Virtues and the Fruit of the Spirit*, by Maxie Dunnam and Kimberly Dunnam Reisman, Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998, pp. 42-47.