

Courage

Joshua 1:1-9

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First Central Congregational UCC

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Before I read today's scripture lesson, let me set the stage a little bit. The reading is from the Book of Joshua which tells stories about the time when the Children of Israel entered the Promised Land for the first time. They had been slaves in Egypt. After crying out to God for deliverance, God sent Moses to lead them to freedom. They spent forty years in the wilderness of the Sinai, receiving the law and entering into covenant relationship with God.

Now Moses has died, and it has fallen to Joshua to lead the people into the Promised Land where they face opposition from those people who already live there. In the twenty-first century we should have a complicated moral response to the Book of Joshua and its stories of conquest that verge on genocide. That said, I am still drawn to these words of encouragement spoken by God to Joshua as he assumes the mantle of leadership. Hear now these words from the Book of Joshua.

After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying, "My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. From the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, to the Great Sea in the west shall be your territory. No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

For the Word of God in scripture,

For the Word of God among us,

For the Word of God within us,

Thanks be to God.

Who are the courageous people you've known?

I pondered that question this week and a long list of names jumped to mind.

There was Herbert Holcomb, a church member of mine in Fayetteville, Arkansas who chose not to receive treatment for his pancreatic cancer and spent the last year of his life enjoying time with family and friends.

There's Clara Luper, who I only met in person once. She organized the sit-in movement in Oklahoma City in the 1950's when she was a school teacher. She and her students would sit at segregated lunch counters and receive much abuse. She was a tiny woman, with amazing strength.

Or Michael Barth, the high school kid from Gordon, Nebraska who last year won at the state speech tournament but the state activities director barred him from delivering his speech on NET, a decision later overturned after great public outcry. I don't think I've ever seen a teenager, who didn't choose to become a news story, be so eloquent and brave in the midst of the spotlight and to then publicly discuss how he had been bullied and shamed because he didn't fit gender norms.

I thought of my own mother. I watched her make difficult decisions, mostly alone, in the months after my father died. You could tell that she really wanted to escape from it all, but she knew she couldn't, and she faced those trying days with fortitude.

Also my mother-in-law. She immigrated to the United States from the Philippines in order to marry Michael's dad, bringing with her her oldest son, Allan. It's a brave act to leave everything one has known, travel around the world, and begin a new life.

I would also place my husband Michael on the list of courageous people I've known. We met through our activism; that week he was arrested as part of a protest at Oral Roberts University. Michael has always been a brilliant combination of passionate conviction and smart, strategic thinking. He also shows courage every single day by living with me. (By the way, I'm convinced that anyone who stays married has to learn courage.)

In this congregation I've known courageous people. Like Bob Runyon who flew surveillance planes over the Atlantic Ocean at night during the Second World War. I can't imagine being out there alone in the dark over the vast expanse of water night after night.

Also Rick Zaiss who faced cancer with bravery.

Or Dr. Phil Smith and his work with Ebola patients.

Or Marilyn Hammond who I knew for years and never even realized she had a disability.

As I was pondering this question—"Who are the courageous people you've known?"—I posted it to Facebook, and I enjoyed the many responses. Here are what members of this congregation shared.

Stephanie Cameron: "My mother! She's seen the best and the worst of people and traumatic situations and yet she still has a positive spirit. Love her."

Sara Sharpe: "My son Jake."

Bonnie Sarton Mierau: "My clients, young and not as young, who face their past traumas and turn the corner to redefine themselves as whole beings worthy of love and respect. I often stand in awe of the courage and grit it takes to do this hard, hard work."

Tara Obner: "The homeless people courageous enough to walk into a shelter and ask for help."

Kelly Beaman: "Anyone willing to go public to make a difference."

Eventually a couple of church members made broader comments. Bonnie Harmon wrote, "The most courageous people I know would never realize what courage it takes to be them. They know life is hard, but it doesn't occur to them that it's harder for them than it is for others. They think that there is something they can do that will make someone else's life better and they try to do it."

And Randy Solberg said, "Anyone who gets up every day, goes to work and keeps on going regardless of how much they hate it because someone depends upon them to eat, for a roof or for life. Courage is about facing life every day and doing it every day without fanfare or thanks - because you have to. It is about people doing dirty jobs that no one else will do and not giving up."

This week as I was thinking about this question and watching the answers appear on Facebook, I began to wonder if courage is in fact the most common of the virtues, for I seem to see it everywhere, in all types of people? Even before Randy posted it, I began to wonder, Is it possible that each of us demonstrates courage every day just by getting up and going about our lives?

Here are some of the various descriptions I read of courage and fortitude:

"the ability to confront fear, pain, risk/danger, uncertainty, or intimidation."

"the ability to act rightly in the face of popular opposition, shame, scandal, or discouragement."

"to have the courage of one's convictions, to act in accordance with one's beliefs, esp. in spite of criticism."

"Courage is the resolve to act virtuously, especially when it is most difficult. It is acting for the good, when it would be much easier not to this time."

"firmness of spirit, especially in difficulty."

"a willingness to freely go beyond the call of duty, to make sacrifices, to act on your convictions."

This season I'm preaching a series on the virtues entitled "The Good Life." Every week, I've talked about how we cultivate the virtues and what practices will instill the habits of virtue within our character. But as I was writing Thursday morning, I kept realizing how many of you already demonstrate this virtue. I thought of Margaret Hole and Barb Switzer, of Melanie Naughtin and Sam Pfeifer, of Shelley Kiel, Jeannie Bates, and Eli Sturek, of Tara Obner, Scott Hoyt, Bruce Garver and Pam Finley, of Rick Brenneman, Peg Peterson, Pete Peterson, and Bonnie Mierau . . . and very soon I realized that this list could go on and on and on.

So instead of preaching about the importance of courage and how to acquire it, I want you to simply realize how strong and brave you already are. How you choose every single day to persevere through difficulty. How you already choose to do what is right and good, even when it isn't easy.

Bless you. Bless you for your courage and fortitude, your moral and intellectual strength that you demonstrate each and every day of your lives. Thank you for being good people who together are helping one another become even better people. Thank you for making this world a better place.