

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
The Spirit at Work: Courage  
The Rev. Joanne Blair  
June 23, 2019

Acts 9:21-25

We are in week 2 of our sermon series, “The Spirit at Work,” and this week we are talking about courage. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines courage as: “mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty.”

Well, the story of David’s battle with Goliath certainly demonstrates courage. Here we have this young man who has been guiding sheep now daring to face down a huge, Philistine warrior just by using a slingshot and five smooth stones. And we know how the story ends: David flung a stone to Goliath’s forehead, knocked Goliath to the ground, and then killed him. We all like to hear stories of the triumph of the unlikely hero, the underdog. The story of David and Goliath is one of the best known and most told stories in the Bible, where the seeming underdog comes out on top. But this celebrated story is also one of the most misunderstood. Many think that this is a story of personal courage in the face of insurmountable odds, that if you face down your giant with courage you will always come out victorious. But there is much more to this story. There is a reason our scripture reading today ends before the match. David’s courage is demonstrated not in killing the giant but in fighting him. David did not have great military experience; he demonstrates that courage and power have other sources, namely, Yahweh. What drove David’s courage was his confidence in God’s promises and God’s power to fulfill them. He was not so much confident in himself as he was confident in God.

So how does this dramatic story correlate with our second reading of the day, that of Paul being lowered in a basket to escape capture and death? For Paul, himself, writes in his letter to the church in Corinth that being lowered in a basket at night was humiliating. Yet Paul exhibits courage before, during, and after his escape. Paul, one of the greatest role-reversals in the Bible. Other than Jesus, no person influenced the history of the Christian community more than Paul. No wonder the people were confused! This man had always fought for the importance of the law and would punish anyone who disagreed, even unto death – especially followers of Jesus. Yet after his conversion, this Pharisee of Pharisees immediately went out to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God. Those who conspired to kill Jesus, those who conspired to kill Stephen, and those under King Aretas are now after Paul. Paul, the persecutor, is now the persecuted. While he may consider being lowered in a basket humiliating and an act of weakness, it was an act of courage to proclaim the good news and an act of courage to face the dangerous unknown by traveling about and continuing to do so.

As his opposition increased their attack, Saul became more powerful. The Greek word used here for “powerful” denotes “strength from the work of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>1</sup> “We call this strength: courage.

There is a great difference between courage and bravado and we sometimes confuse the two. Bravado is daring, audacious, uninspired boldness. Many of you know that I used to skydive. And yes, it took daring boldness to do so. But there was nothing inspired about it. I just really wanted to do it. It was an act of

bravado, (though my parents probably used a different word!) Courage, on the other hand, is not autonomous. It is not a self-produced virtue. Courage is produced by faith, faith in God or something else.

I want to turn again to the definition of courage: “mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty.” We usually think of danger as a threat to our physical safety and we often think of courage in the most dramatic of situations – soldiers in action on the battlefield, firefighters, first responders. These are people of extreme courage and I know we are all very grateful for the gifts of their service. Most of us, gratefully, will not face these types of challenges. But we are put in situations where our spiritual strength, our physical health, our moral fiber, and our choices are challenged. And courage, by very definition, acknowledges fear and difficulty. Yet we are to persevere and withstand it.

In the King James version of the Bible, people who count such things have noted that the words “fear not” appear 365 times (one for each day of the year ☺). This, in itself, demonstrates that although God does not wish us to be afraid, we humans experience fear. And, the words “courage” or “courageous” appear 26 times, stressing its importance.

So where does courage, real courage (not bravado), come from? It is the work of the Holy Spirit. Courage comes from trust in the ultimate goodness and presence of God. In this trust we allow ourselves to be vulnerable. Real courage recognizes that we cannot persevere in our challenges alone. We need God, who is right here with us. The call for God’s people to be courageous is always based upon the confidence in God to be with us.

Courage does not mean that things will always turn out the way we hope. Courage is facing the challenge even when we aren’t assured of the outcome. Every act of courage takes place in the life of an ordinary person. Courage is needed to fight life’s everyday battles: addiction, cancer, resentment, greed. Each of us has many battles to be fought in our life. We need courage, and we need each other, to do so.

Last week Pastor John spoke of being called to community, by God, for the purpose of blessing the world. That takes courage and we can – and should – be God’s instruments to encourage one another. Being in community helps strengthen our faith, build our courage, and allow the Holy Spirit to do her work even better.

Having courage doesn’t always have to do with fighting a giant or being persecuted. But it always has to do with trusting God. Whatever battle we are fighting, the Holy Spirit will give us the courage – *if* we but trust.

And so our challenge this week is to ask ourselves:

- Am I exhibiting courage in whatever battle I’m fighting?
- Am I trusting in the love and promises of God, no matter what the outcome?
- And am I allowing the Spirit to use me to help encourage others?

<sup>1</sup> Eph 6:20, Phil 4:13, 2 Tim 4:17