

## COURAGE

Psalm 27; Acts 20:17-38  
A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham  
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Tuesday morning, when the final few members of that young soccer team were extracted safely from that watery cave in Thailand, we all felt such relief, did we not? Such joyous good news when we finally saw the boys, smiling through their hospital masks – good news in a time when there seems to be precious little good news to share. Through it all, and especially as the details of the rescue were shared, I was in awe of the courage of those who went to extraordinary lengths and great risk to bring them out. That kind of courage always astounds me.

Later Tuesday afternoon I happened to walk by the door of the New York Fire Department's Ladder Company 3 on 13<sup>th</sup> Street, less than a block from where Marla and I are living. And one by one, I read the names of the twelve courageous firefighters from that company who risked and lost their lives trying to help in the horror of that September day seventeen years ago – twelve of 343. Such courage humbles me.

Those memorial plaques brought to mind a billboard I had seen last weekend in North Carolina. It showed the now-iconic face of a Pakistani girl named Malala, who was shot in the head by the Taliban at age 15 for speaking up for girls' education. Next to Malala's serene gaze, the text said: "Girls should learn history. And make it. Courage is in you. Pass it on."<sup>1</sup> But I wonder sometimes if such courage really *is* in me.

So much of life itself seems to demand courage in these days. The climate is going crazy. People are becoming more and more alienated from each other. Ignorance is celebrated over basic knowledge. The principalities and powers seek to require of us submission to all sorts of questionable ends. And we are tugged at times between resignation or action. We know, of course, that acting will require of us courage. Courage to stand in the face of injustice. Courage to put our own moral convictions on the line. Courage to take personal risks in the service of a greater common good. Courage to overcome our fears for the sake of family or friends or community or nation...or planet.

The poet Maya Angelou once argued that courage may be the most important of all human virtues, because, she said, "Without courage, we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We can't be kind, true, merciful, generous, or honest (without courage)."<sup>2</sup>

Of course, not every form of courage is virtuous. I read the story recently of a woman and her husband who had to interrupt their vacation for an emergency visit to a dentist. "I want a tooth pulled," she said, "and I don't want Novocain because I'm in a big hurry. Just extract the tooth as quickly as possible, and we'll be on our way."

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<sup>1</sup> You can see it and similar inspirational billboards at <https://www.passiton.com/inspirational-sayings-billboards/>

<sup>2</sup> In a commencement address at Cornell University, May 2008.

The dentist seemed impressed. “Well, that’s courageous,” he said. “Which tooth is it?” The woman turned to her husband and said, “Show him your tooth, dear.”

So, maybe not all courage involves personal cost. But more often than not, it does. And one researcher says it starts – courage starts – with our willingness to be vulnerable. In a renowned TED Talk some years ago, which has now been viewed more than eight million times on YouTube, University of Houston research professor Brené Brown noted that the word “courage” is derived from the Latin word, *cor*, which means “heart,” and its original meaning was to “tell the story of who you are with your whole heart.”<sup>3</sup> It means to know oneself, in all of one’s complexity and vulnerability, and to let that self come forth.

How will we tell the story of who we are with our whole hearts? Knowing our own hearts, how will we act in the face of human need, in the face of great danger, in the face of prejudice and bigotry, in the face of irrational anger or community turmoil? What do our hearts tell us to do in such moments?

Or, a bit less dramatically, where will our hearts take us when by choice or by circumstance we are called to relinquish the securities we have known and upon which we have depended, and to strike out in some new direction, vulnerable to that new space and time we are entering because we are, after all, on a mission *of the heart*: a move to a new location... leaving home for the first time... moving to the city... beginning a new job... bringing home one’s first-born. Such moments almost always present themselves as occasions of great joy or great fear, and probably, if we are honest, an admixture of both.

In his farewell discourse to the elders of the church at Ephesus, the apostle Paul spoke of facing a decisive and defining moment in his ministry. He was ready, he said, as “a captive of the Spirit,” to head for Jerusalem, not knowing what would happen to him there, except that the testimony of the Spirit had been for him that it might involve imprisonment and persecution. Still, said Paul, he would press on in the ministry that he had received, “to testify to the good news of God’s grace.” (Acts 20:22-24) It wasn’t necessarily his choice to face such tumult in his life, but Paul understood it as his calling... and in keeping with his *whole-hearted* desire to serve God. He understood in such frightful prospects the ultimate purpose for which he had been born. In that purpose he discovered his courage.

Some of you are of sufficient age to remember John F. Kennedy’s response when he was cited for heroism during World War II. In August of 1943 in the Solomon Islands, an enemy destroyer rammed his PT boat. Kennedy and some of his men reached a nearby island, but found it was held by the enemy. So, he and another officer swam some distance to another island, where they persuaded the inhabitants to send a message to the American forces, who rescued them. When asked later to define the source of his courage and to comment on his heroism, Kennedy smiled and said simply, “It was involuntary. They sank my boat.”<sup>4</sup> Involuntary, perhaps, but rooted in a deep sense of purpose and loyalty.

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzIF7o> .

<sup>4</sup> Clifton Fadimon, ed., *The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes*, New York, Little, Brown and Company, 1986, 326-27.

It wasn't voluntary for the apostle Paul either – his calling to preach and share the good news to the Gentiles. He was summoned to it. And his courage in responding to that calling was not something he conjured up on his own. It was something he discovered in being true to his heart and to his vocation and in his conviction that he was accompanied in such vocation by the presence of Christ.

The novelist Marilynne Robinson writes, “Theologians talk about a prevenient grace that precedes grace itself and allows us to accept it. I think there must also be a prevenient courage that allows us to be brave – that is, to acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is to do great harm. And therefore, this courage allows us, as the old men said, to make ourselves useful. It allows us to be generous, which is another way of saying exactly the same thing.”<sup>5</sup>

Courage does not always entail death-defying deeds. It often shows up more subtly. Courage is what enables us to get up in the morning some days, and to lie down at night on others. It is the act of responding to what is foundational to who and whose we are. The twentieth-century American poet Anne Sexton caught something of courage's range in her poem entitled simply, “Courage.”

It is in the small things we see it.  
 The child's first step,  
 as awesome as an earthquake.  
 The first time you rode a bike,  
 wallowing up the sidewalk.  
 The first spanking when your heart  
 went on a journey all alone.  
 When they called you crybaby  
 or poor or fatty or crazy  
 and made you into an alien,  
 you drank their acid  
 and concealed it.

Later,  
 if you faced the death of bombs and bullets  
 you did not do it with a banner,  
 you did it with only a hat to  
 cover your heart.  
 You did not fondle the weakness inside you  
 though it was there.  
 Your courage was a small coal  
 that you kept swallowing.  
 If your buddy saved you  
 and died himself in so doing,  
 then his courage was not courage,  
 it was love; love as simple as shaving soap.

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<sup>5</sup> Marilynne, Robinson, *Gilead*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York, 2004, 246.

....  
 Later,  
 when you face old age and its natural conclusion  
 your courage will still be shown in the little ways,  
 each spring will be a sword you'll sharpen,  
 those you love will live in a fever of love,  
 and you'll bargain with the calendar  
 and at the last moment  
 when death opens the back door  
 you'll put on your carpet slippers  
 and stride out.<sup>6</sup>

Courage wears many faces. At an exhibition of Norman Rockwell paintings a few years ago my eyes fixed on a particular drawing, one that depicted a young African-American schoolgirl in a white dress, flanked by four faceless U.S. marshals, making her way into an elementary school – a racial epithet scrawled on the wall behind her. The school depicted in that painting was the William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans. The year was 1960. And the child was six-year-old Ruby Bridges. It was the year that school integration came to New Orleans, and it wasn't pretty. The crowds outside the school hurled tomatoes and racial slurs at Ruby Bridges; once she was inside, white parents came to withdraw their children from school. Every day for that school year, Ruby Bridges faced the shouts and the slurs as she made her way into the school. A small, six-year-old child, of whom so many were afraid.

One day her teacher, Barbara Henry, looked out the window and thought she saw Ruby talking with the crowd. But Ruby told Mrs. Henry later that she wasn't talking to the crowd; she was praying. Her mother had always said to her, "Ruby, if I'm not with you and you're afraid, then always say your prayers." So, in the midst of an angry mob, Ruby prayed. She prayed for the people in the crowd. She prayed for those who were hurling abuse at her. Hers is a remarkable story of courage and faith in the life of a six-year-old child, a child who, even at that tender age, began to understand a purpose and calling in life that was larger than she was.<sup>7</sup>

Courage. Whence does it come? It is rooted in our hearts, in a deep sense of purpose, which is like a small coal one keeps swallowing, even amid persistent fears. It comes from the accompaniment of Christ, who shines light on our path and on our purpose. It comes from the confidence that God has given us all we need to carry out our vocation, our purpose, and that the future, whatever it holds, is in God's hands. That is the promise of our baptism. It comes from wakefulness to the communion of saints, the great cloud of witnesses singing the background music of our lives, reminding us of who and Whose we are.

The Lord is my light and my salvation;  
 whom shall I fear?

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<sup>6</sup> As cited in *Good Poems*, Garrison Keillor, ed., New York, Penguin Books, 2003, 213-214.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Coles tells the story in several writings, including a children's book, *The Story of Ruby Bridges*. I revisited the story in an NPR interview with Ruby Bridges Hall, broadcast February 18, 1997. [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/race\\_relations/jan-june97/bridges\\_2-18.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/race_relations/jan-june97/bridges_2-18.html). The Rockwell painting is "The Problem We All Live With;" it can be found online.

The Lord is the stronghold of my life;  
Of whom shall I be afraid?

Wait for the Lord;  
be strong, and let your heart take courage;  
wait for the Lord! (Ps. 27:1, 14)

In life and in death we belong to God, the One who has been our help in ages past, and will be our hope for years to come. We were born to serve that One, born to such a purpose, born with such fire in our hearts. Courage is in you. Pass it on.