



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Be of Good Courage

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 14, 2015
The Third Sunday after Pentecost—Based on 2 Corinthians 5:6-17*

I asked my wife, Valerie, this past week: "In your wildest dreams could you have imagined our good fortune over the years? After seminary we were privileged to serve several wonderful parishes in the Carolinas, and then we were called to one of the largest and most vibrant parishes of the southwest, Saint Michael and All Angels, Dallas, and then moving into the possibility of retirement, we have now been called to be the interim at St. Bart's in New York. In your wildest dreams could you have imagined such wonderful blessings?" There was a long pause, and then Valerie said, "Sweetheart, I love you very much, but you're never in my wildest dreams!"

Speaking of dreams, I had one before coming to be with you for the first time. And all three of your recent rectors were in the dream. You could kind of say that it was a nightmare. Well, in this dream, I was in a cloudy, heavenly environment, and as I walked across the clouds, I saw in the distance a big table, on which sat a big book. And there was an ominous person sitting behind the table. The voice said: "You go up!" I thought, "What good news," because I looked to the left and I saw a greasy pole going down into the abyss. "You go up," the voice repeated, but for every sin you've ever committed you must make a mark of chalk on each rung of the ladder as you climb. And there's the ladder and there's the chalk." I looked to my right and there sat an enormous vat of chalk. So I began. And in this dream it took forever to climb ... mark a rung and climb, mark a rung and climb, mark a rung and climb. And then from nowhere, there was pressure on my hands. I looked up and it was Tom Bowers, Bill Tully and Buddy Stallings all stepping on my hands.... They were coming down for more chalk!

Our biblical theme for today is "Be of Good Courage."

Let us pray.

In the fall of 1960, the people of New Orleans, both white and black, were full of fear,

It seems that a federal judge had ordered that by the beginning of that fall all public schools in New Orleans would be integrated. The white community worked out their fear by threatening to keep all their children home from school, and they would protest outside each school until the courts changed their minds. The black community was fearful as well. They also decided that they would keep their children home because of threats of violence, injury and death. All African American families stayed away except one: Ruby Bridges and her parents.

Ruby Bridges turned six that spring and she was excited about starting the first grade. The NAACP had contacted Ruby's parents to ask if they might be the exception; that they would encourage their little, petite girl to attend school. They agreed.

The first morning of school Ruby was escorted by federal marshals through screaming, jeering white crowds, several who spat on her and called her names. It is reported that Ruby walked peacefully and resolutely through the crowds for many days, to enter an empty school and to learn her lessons with one teacher, as the lone student.

Dr. Robert Coles, a psychiatrist and an Episcopalian, heard the story of Ruby Bridges, and he received permission from Harvard, where he was a full professor, to take a leave of absence and go to New Orleans to study the life of Ruby Bridges. He was determined to find out how a little girl mounts up the good courage to face such challenges so peacefully and resolutely at such a young age. He records his findings in his seminal book, "The Moral Life of Children."

When he interviewed her mother, and asked, "Where did Ruby learn to have such courage?" Ruby's mother answered: "She learned it in Sunday school. She learned about courage from Jesus. She learned that in his love for all humanity, Jesus took on great challenges for the sake of others, especially in the way that he bore his cross."

In last week's Epistle text we heard the Apostle Paul speaking to the Corinthians about having a courageous determination. He encouraged them, "Do not lose heart." In this week's text (2 Corinthians 5:6-17), the Apostle continues that theme. Twice he says, "Maintain your confidence," or in the old RSV text, "Be of good courage." When we note that a local leader is

consistently urging a community to "not lose heart" and to "keep up their courage," we know that they must be facing set-backs and challenges. And we know that the Apostle Paul faced his own difficulties: he was shipwrecked three times, beaten with rods at least twice and imprisoned ... and finally murdered by the Roman authorities.

From what spring do people like Ruby Bridges, the Apostle Paul, and Jesus himself drink, to have the kind of courage that faces down difficult challenges in a peaceful, non-violent, but resolute way? Well, the scriptures indicate that it comes to us as a gift from God. Courage is a power that seemingly surges from the heart into our wills, leads us beyond merely thinking and talking, and pushes us to do the right thing even when we are terribly afraid that in so acting it could be costly.

We see this costliness lived out in the pages of scripture. We learn about courage in a variety of stories: Abraham climbing Mount Moriah to sacrifice Isaac; Job seeking understanding under the hot sun; David mounting up resolve in the cave; Elijah finding strength in the desert; Moses coming to terms with his call while watching from Mt. Nebo his whole community going into the land of promise; Jesus facing the cross of Calvary; and the Apostle Paul being beaten and finally killed.

Who and what is our model? Ruby Bridges' mother identified him: Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus picked up the cross of brutality and made it into a cross of love. You and I are invited to pick up the crosses that come our way and carry them ... Where? Calvary? No, if we are carrying a cross, then crucifixion is presupposed. We are invited to carry our crosses through crucifixion to resurrection ... to an empty tomb ... in Paul's words, "to new life." And, oh, do we have some crosses!

- + A six-year-old who is being terrorized by the neighborhood bully -- is a cross.
- + A nine-year-old who sees her letters backwards, and discovers that she has dyslexia -- is a cross.
- + The 8th grader who has no one with whom to eat during the lunch hour, and is not included in any social arrangements at school -- is a cross.
- + The high school girl who discovers that she is sexually attracted to girls and is ridiculed for her orientation -- is a cross.
- + The 22-year-old who finishes a very expensive degree at NYU and cannot find his life's vocational track -- is a cross.
- + The 84-year-old who hears from the Oncologist, "It's cancer" -- is a cross.

What we learn in our Epistle text is that our deepest courage comes from adversity. Our most abiding trust comes from a God who lays down his life for the world. Our surest sense of love and forgiveness comes from the One who while hanging on a cross states, "Father, forgive them."

Every scar, every hurt, every disappointment, every setback is seen and experienced differently in the light of God's courageous, suffering and victorious love. You see, not even the murder of Jesus could separate us from the love of God!

So we ask: How did Jesus display this good courage in the face of Holy Week?

First, he set his face to Jerusalem. He faced the challenge in front of him. He didn't hide from it, he didn't avoid it, he didn't pretend that it didn't exist. We also must face the setback, the difficulties, the challenges before us.

Second, he prayed. Time and time again, Jesus went off to pray. But especially the night before he died, he spent the evening in prayer. He bids us to have a deep and abiding prayer life. It is there that we will discover aspects of God's gift of encouragement and courage.

Third, he willingly gave of himself to his mission; he didn't hold anything back for a rainy day. Beginning in baptism, you and I are called upon to give of our whole self to others, to be generous, to be extra loving, to extend ourselves and our resources beyond our comfort zone.

Fourth, he received help. On the way to Skull Hill, Jesus fell under the weight of his cross. A bystander, Simon of Cyrene, was called upon to assist. Jesus needed help! We find great courage when we help each other.

In 1979, while I was in seminary, I was invited to preach at the LaCross Primitive Baptist Church in North Florida. The Rev. Willie Smith, an African American pastor and good friend, invited me to preach one Sunday morning. At the appointed time, I rose from my chair and went to the pulpit, a large piece of furniture in the middle of the nave, and the choir was behind and around me. As I began to preach, I noticed that some humming began from the choir. I continued. The humming then went into

lyrics. The organ began playing. It was at such a volume that I took my cue and sat down. The choir finished this interlude, and then I rose and finished the sermon. When I made mention of being surprised by this wonderful and interesting tradition following the service, Willie said, "Oh, that's not our tradition. But when you began to preach, my associate pastor leaned over to me and said, "That boy is going to need some help!" "

We all need help with our challenges and setbacks. God help us to ask for help.

And, last, Jesus rose from the cross in exultation. Being marked as Christ's own in courage means to celebrate coming through our challenges with resolution. We don't always know when and how it will happen. We don't always know who will be involved and what it will take. But we are encouraged to "not lose heart."

So, my new friends, "be of good courage."

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