

## **"Act with Courage"**

*ACT UP - Small Group Campaign Fall 2017*

**November 5, 2017**

**North East United Methodist Church**

**Rev. Dr. Drew M. Christian**

Charles Swindoll tells the story about a test conducted by a university where 10 students were placed in a room. 3 lines of varying length were drawn on a card. The students were told to raise their hands when the instructor pointed to the longest line. But 9 of the students had been instructed beforehand to raise their hands when the instructor pointed to the second longest line. 1 student was the stooge. The usual reaction of the stooge was to put his hand up, look around, and realizing he was all alone, pull it back down. This happened 75% of the time, with students from grade school through high school.

We must have courage...courage to stand when others are not...courage in the midst of peer pressure...in the midst of change...in the midst of fear...

Paul showed great courage. Paul is undaunted by threats to his life. He is prepared to do whatever it takes, including dying, *"to finish the race and complete the task"* laid out for him to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. Just in this week's readings, Paul faces beatings, imprisonment, a murder plot, trumped up charges, false accusations, and an escape from Jerusalem under the cover of darkness.

Acts 20:18-24 - Paul states, ***"You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit***

***solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God."***

During another point in his journey, Paul travels to Caesarea and it is there we read, in Acts 21:10-14, ***"As we were staying there for some days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, 'This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.' When we had heard this, we as well as the local residents began begging him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, 'What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.' And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, 'The will of the Lord be done!'"***

Jews saw Paul preaching in the temple in Jerusalem and stirred up the crowd, wanting to kill him...there was a riot and Paul had to be carried by the Roman soldiers into the barracks in order to not be taken by the crowd...Then Paul, with great courage and purpose, asked to speak before the very crowd that wanted to kill him...

Acts 21:39-40 - ***But Paul said, "I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city; and I beg you, allow me to speak to the people." When he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the stairs, motioned to the people with his hand; and when there was a great hush, he spoke to them in the Hebrew dialect, saying...***

Paul understood courage...Paul understood, like Nelson Mandela, that ***"courage [is] not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear."***

I am sure there were times when Paul was afraid...but understood that he was called to be courageous...and courage, as Mark Twain explained, called for *"resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear."* Paul also understood something else in the midst of fear...in the midst of threats to his life, imprisonment, and false accusations...Paul knew that he was not alone...



God had told Paul on more than one occasion to *"Take courage"...* *"Do not be afraid"...* Paul has the Holy Spirit to guide him, to encourage him, and to give him the courage he needs to complete his work...

God tells us...sends us the same message through His Word...God speaks the words *"Fear not," "Do not be afraid," "Do not fear,"* hundreds of times in the scriptures...God tells us that the Holy Spirit will *"help us in our weakness,"* will be our *"helper,"* will *"guide us into all truth,"* will fill us *"with joy and peace,"* and the spirit of God is NOT *"a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and of a sound mind."*

Paul is a man of extraordinary courage, but it is God, it is the Holy Spirit, that gives each of us the courage we need to do our work. Paul credits the Holy Spirit for keeping him going in the face of such adversity. This is an encouragement to us today, because we also can depend on the Holy Spirit to give us the courage we may lack.

This week is Veterans Day...



On November 11<sup>th</sup> we remember the many who have fought for freedom, stood for justice, threw themselves into harms' way for their brothers and sisters...We remember those who fought in the World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan...who had the courage to go forth and stand in the gap for us...who have shown us what it is to be courageous...to run towards one's fears not away...

Paul, the early Christians in the midst of great persecution, our veterans, the many who have died fighting for human rights and all things good...these are our inspiration...we must follow their example...

For us it may not mean running into battle, but it may mean standing up for what is right...for what is good...fighting for the rights of the unborn and the refugee...reaching out to our homeless veterans...calling for clean drinking water and an end to hunger both within our borders and abroad...

- Courage does not mean fighting for what we want...it is not selfish...
- Courage does not complain behind someone's back but follows Jesus' instruction to go and speak with the person, openly and lovingly...
- Courage does not quit when things get rough...does not walk away...
- Courage does not maintain things the way they are but works instead for something better, following God into an unknown future...
- Courage is listening to the opposition's viewpoint...
- Courage is recognizing that you might be wrong...

- Courage is not giving up...it is getting up each day and asking God to walk with us into the battles we will face, knowing we will face those battles with faith...we will not quit...we will make a difference...in our marriage...our family...our church...our community...our world...We will take a stand for Christ in our workplace...in our schools...amongst our friends...Our decisions will honor Jesus...

One of the greatest dangers is not so much that courage may fail us in the moment of greatest terror, but that general worry will deter us from taking even the first step into following the ways of God's kingdom in our work.

- Will we have the courage to step up and serve...to use our gifts in the church, serving God in ministry and mission?
- Will we have the courage to reprioritize our lives so Bible study, prayer, and ministry will begin to take on a greater emphasis in our lives?
- Will we have the courage to put our families, our marriages, first before the craziness life throws at us?
- Will we have the courage to reach out to those who are different, who need our compassion?
- Will our leadership have the courage to stand for what God is leading us to do, to help move North East UMC into the future, to get ourselves out of the way and allow God to lead?

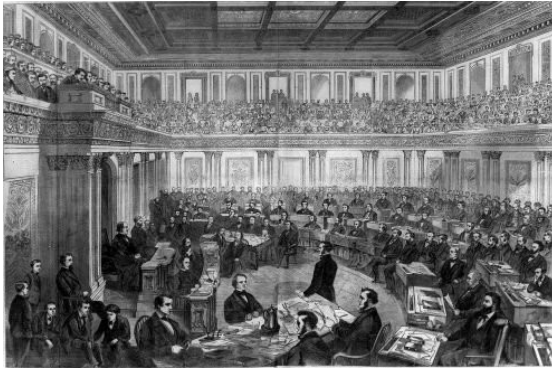
In researching this message, I read a story about Senator Edmund G. Ross of Kansas.

Conflict was dividing our government in the wake of the Civil War. President Andrew Johnson was determined to follow Lincoln's policy of reconciliation toward the defeated South. Congress, however, wanted to rule the downtrodden Confederate states with an iron hand. Congress decided to strike first. Shortly after Senator Ross was seated, the Senate introduced impeachment proceedings against the hated President. The radicals calculated that they needed thirty-six votes, and smiled as they concluded that the thirty-sixth was none other than Ross'.



The new senator listened to the vigilante talk. But to the surprise of many, he declared that the president "*deserved as fair a trial as any accused man has ever had on earth.*" The word immediately went out that his vote was "shaky." Ross received an avalanche of anti-Johnson telegrams from every section of the country. Radical senators badgered him to "come to his senses."

The fateful day of the vote arrived.



The courtroom galleries were packed. Tickets for admission were at an enormous premium. As a deathlike stillness fell over the Senate chamber, the vote began. By the time they reached Ross, twenty-four "guilties" had been announced. Eleven more were certain. Only Ross' vote was needed to impeach the President. Unable to conceal his emotion, the Chief Justice asked in a trembling voice, "*Mr. Senator Ross, how vote you? Is the respondent Andrew Johnson guilty as charged?*"

Ross later explained, at that moment, *"I looked into my open grave. Friendships, position, fortune, and everything that makes life desirable to an ambitious man were about to be swept away by the breath of my mouth, perhaps forever."* Then, the answer came -- unhesitating, unmistakable: *"Not guilty!"* With that, the trial was over.

A high public official from Kansas wired Ross to say: *"Kansas repudiates you as she does all perjurers and skunks."* The "open grave" vision had become a reality. Ross' political career was in ruins. Extreme ostracism, and even physical attack awaited his family upon their return home. One gloomy day Ross turned to his faithful wife and said, *"Millions cursing me today will bless me tomorrow...though not but God can know the struggle it has cost me."*

Twenty years later Congress and the Supreme Court verified the wisdom of his position, by changing the laws related to impeachment. Prior to his death, Ross was awarded a special pension by Congress. The press and country took this opportunity to honor his courage which, they finally concluded, had saved our country from crisis and division.

Courage.

***Acts 20:22-24 - "And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God."***

Rev. Linda Pevey asks several great questions in the study this week...

- 1. In what area of your life do you need courage like Paul's?**
- 2. In what areas of the church do we need courage like Paul's?**

3. What things are we afraid of in fulfilling God's purpose for our lives, individually and as a church? In other words, why aren't we doing what God has for us to do?
4. What problems in our lives, church, community, and world need to be addressed that we need to find courage to address?
5. What would you like to be able to say about yourself and your ministry at the end of your life? What steps do you need to take now in order for that to happen?

I keep this picture on my phone as a reminder...



The picture shows a man...surrounded by a great crowd of people saluting Adolph Hitler...the man, circled, stands by himself...arms at his side... refusing to salute even though the punishment was imprisonment and most likely, death...I pray that when the moments come that I must stand firm as a husband, father, and pastor, that I am to remember God is with me and am able to show courage as this man alone in the crowd showed that day...

**Acts 23:11 - *But on the night immediately following, the Lord stood at his side and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also."***

No matter what you face...no matter what we face as a country, as a church, as a community...know that the Lord stands by your side...



*"Take courage"...*