

"Courage in Little Things"

Psalm 46; II Corinthians 5:6-10

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

May 3, 2015 – 5th Sunday of Easter – Rev. Ronald Botts

A certain actress recounts the time when she got her first starring role in the theater. She was just 17 and watched proudly as her name went up on the marquee the eve of opening night. Yet, the more she thought about her good fortune, the more she became worried. She began to fear everything that could go wrong, until she became all but paralyzed.

"I became so afraid on opening night," she said, "that I told my mother I wanted to stay home in bed, but my mother made me get up and go to the theater. She told me something that I will never forget. She said, 'If you cannot be good, then [at least] you must have the courage to be bad.'"

Paul speaks of fear and courage, too, in his letter to the church at Corinth. He begins this passage, "So we are always confident." Another translation puts it similarly, "We are of good courage." Either word will do: courage or confidence. Both affirm what follows.

Paul is telling these fellow Christians that he can face whatever may come his way because of God's love for him. And that love will not desert him nor let him go, now or in the future. This thought fills him with courage when he knows his own resolve would fail him.

Ever since Paul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, from a persecutor of Christ to a follower of Christ, his life took many demanding turns. Naturally, he was seen as a traitor to those whose cause he had formerly shared. There is ample evidence that Paul's downfall was eagerly sought in some circles. If he regularly looked over his shoulder, it wasn't paranoia. He knew he would be in danger should he let his guard down. Simply to assert his new-found faith publicly risked his life.

To really understand Paul you have to consider how he viewed life. For him it had two parallel forms. There's the life of the body, which is the most obvious. It's the form given to the new-born infant, who grows to maturity, then ages until that body simply wears out and ceases to be. This direct understanding of life is easy to comprehend. Paul shares that physical life with all the rest of humanity.

Yet life also has a greater dimension, another side, equally as real, and stronger still. This is life in the spirit. It's often denied by those who are blind to its existence. They say, "We can't see it and therefore we don't believe it." This denial by skeptics, however, makes spiritual life no less real. It's there all the time for the finding.

"We're confident," Paul says, "we're of good courage, even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We're confident about today and tomorrow even though while we are alive physically, our spiritual union with God remains incomplete. What we will someday realize fully we now accept on belief. We walk by faith, not by sight. But whether we move into life eternally with God, or still live in the world, our aim is the same—to please God. That's how we find our own fulfillment."

So then what Paul says is that the way he gets through hard times and challenges is by his faith. There's no other way. And even if he should come to a physical death, he knows the spiritual self will continue. Once released of the body, the soul will expand into its full being. Death cannot separate him from the love of God; it will only complete it.

This deeper understanding of life is what gives Paul confidence in an unsure world. It gives him courage to do what he needs to do, no matter how hard, or how much the risk.

Now I wish I could be as bold as Paul and say with honesty, "That's me, too." I struggle to find the overwhelming assurance that Paul seems to feel so directly. Maybe that's something that troubles you, too? It appears to come so naturally for him.

I also wish that I could say I'll never fear, but that isn't the case either. I want to be like Paul, supremely confident come what may, but I'm not there yet. How about you? Yet if we're not giving up on the desire to strengthen our faith, then we're continuing to go in the right direction, even if we move by small steps.

I look at the courage of others and mine is so weak by comparison. Consider Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer who went to his death in a Nazi concentration camp, praising God and praying for the souls of those who would soon execute him.

I look at those who marched at Selma, Alabama, to protest the sin of racial injustice or those who defied the majority crowd at Little Rock's Central High School. And all those who have put themselves forward in the struggle for civil rights up to this day. Here are faith-filled people with good courage, a willingness to risk all for what they knew was right.

Did you know that the "Gloria Patri" was sung by early Christian martyrs as they marched to their death? It was the last affirmation they would make, one that stood up to cruelty and hatred, saying: "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end." Would that most of **us** would have that kind of courage!

I don't think the exemplary Christians that come to mind were born with that confidence. Nor do I think anyone could give such courage to them. I suspect that it grew much the same way as a seed that is planted: first very small, then little by little it became larger. Perhaps we move forward by drawing courage from doing little things in life, and then build up to the greater. Courage exercised develops confidence. The more we rely on God today, the more it becomes second-nature tomorrow.

I heard a great example of this in a church meeting I attended yesterday. A certain congregation has taken a leading role in working with the local schools in putting a stop to bullying. The young man who spoke told about a recent workshop he had conducted in a middle school. Afterward, a sixth grader came up to him and said, "I'm a bully. I see it now."

He encouraged the student to talk and this is what he said. "While the teacher was out of the room a group of boys started to make fun of someone in the class. They made him feel real bad. Everybody laughed, and I did, too. I know now that I was a bully even though I didn't start it. I don't ever want to do that again. It isn't right and I won't join in any more. If I stop, maybe others will stop, too."

A moment of awareness, followed by a commitment to action. A little point of courage, but with the possibility that it might grow into something larger.

Life is full of small opportunities to strengthen our courage. By our personal efforts we might never be equal to the task. The physical and emotional "me" steps back from those occasions. I sense on my own | that I lack the will power, the staying power to go forward.

It's then that I'm fortified by remembering this simple prayer: "Lord, help me. " Whenever I pray those words, then open myself to receive God's answer, I'm amazed time and again that I **can** do what needs to be done.

When we're successful in doing the little things in life that require courage, we find increased strength when the more difficult ones come along. It all begins by acknowledging the psalmist's assertion: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear"

Confidence builds up in us over time. Each small step we take moves us forward in faith. Therefore, be of good courage, for God is with you and will make you bolder still... whatever the challenge. With strength from the Lord, you are capable of doing right, and doing it even in the most difficult of times.