Sunday, October 14, 1990
ENDANGERED CHARACTER QUALITIES (No. 2 in a Series: Courage)
Deuteronomy 31:6-8; II Timothy 1:6-7

"I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you...for God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control."
— II Timothy 1:6-7

Among those I believe to be the most endangered and which are to be a central part of the character of those who are seeking to be Christians are: (1) INTEGRITY (the first sermon in this series was about that endangered character quality); (2) COURAGE (the subject of today's sermon); (3) DISCIPLINE; (4) COMMITMENT; (5) VISION; and (6) GRATEFULNESS.

The seeds of these character qualities are born within us and come from that Divine Spark which is part of us because we are created by God in God's image. They come from that original blessing which is God's gift to every human being. They are what give us the capacity to be truly good people.

Because the seeds of these character qualities are God's gift to us from the moment of our birth, Jesus knew that deep down in every one of our lives, although often covered up, there is a longing to be a good person — to be that which God created us to be.

Unfortunately, the culture in which we live frequently is able to tempt us to cover up these important character qualities, or it can undermine them or cause us to give them less value or even push them aside as being no longer useful. We can forget them or even be fooled into practicing a false version of them. And so they have become "endangered character qualities."

In this sermon, we are looking at one of the most misunderstood and therefore most endangered character qualities — COURAGE.

Jesus was a man of courage. Furthermore, he knew the Old Testament of the Bible and its stories of courage. He also told a number of stories about individuals who had the right kind of courage. But before we look at some of these, here are several examples of people in our own time who exhibited the kind of courage Jesus had and taught.

Consider Ruby Bridges. A federal court had ordered the City of New Orleans to open its public schools to Black children. The white people of the city were scared — so were the Black people. The parents of the white children decided that if they had to let Black children in, they would keep their white children out. They let it be known that any Black children who came to school would be in for trouble. So the Black children stayed home too.

Except Ruby Bridges, six years old. Her parents sent her to school all by herself, the first and for a little while the only Black child to attend a New Orleans school. Every morning she walked alone through a heckling crowd to an empty school. White people lined up on both sides of the way and shook their fists at her; they threatened to do terrible things to her if she kept coming to their school. But every morning at ten minutes to eight, Ruby walked, head up, eyes forward, straight through the mob; two U.S. marshals walked ahead of her, and two walked behind her. Then she spent the day alone with her teachers inside the big school building. Ruby could've stayed home. She didn't have to go to school. And every one of the cowards

who heckled and threatened her could have walked away from the crowd and come to Ruby's side. It certainly didn't take any courage to be in the crowd and heckle Ruby.

When interviewed, Ruby's mother said, "There's a lot of people who talk about doing good, and a lot of people who argue about what's good and what's not good, but there are some other people who just put their lives on the line for what's right." That's the kind of courage Jesus had and taught.

Jesus told a story about a good Samaritan who had the courage to stop and help an injured Jew in a day when Jews and Samaritans stayed away from each other, ignored each other, were not supposed to associate with each other in any way, and it was considered sinful to touch one another. The good Samaritan violated some very strong cultural practices. That takes courage.

I believe that deep down, each one of us wants to be a person of courage. Whenever I hear or read stories of courageous people, I say to myself, "That's what I want to be like. I wish I had more of that in my life." I don't want my life controlled by fear. I don't want to cave in under difficult circumstances. I don't want to compromise my convictions. I want to be a courageous person. I want to stand firm for what I know is right. My guess is that you do too.

That's certainly what God desires and makes possible for us. In the second letter to Timothy, we read these words: "I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you...for God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control," in other words, courage.

Unfortunately, too often, the only examples of courage we hear about are those once-in-a-lifetime heroic events. Someone dives in to save a person from drowning or runs into a burning house to carry a child to safety. I like to hear about those courageous acts, but they almost seem bigger than life. Yet the older I get, the more I have come to realize that it also takes a great deal of courage to face the ordinary challenges of life. There are countless people who live every day with tremendous courage, but we will never read about them in the news.

Here's a ten-year-old child who struggled for three years with leukemia: blood transfusions, bone marrow tests, chemotherapy, the whole bit. And through it all, she kept a delightful sense of humor and a firm point of focus. Or what about the young mother, crushed by the death of her three-year-old, yet big-hearted enough to risk it all again by giving birth to two more children.

But what about you and me? Every single day we make choices that show us to be courageous people or show us to be cowardly people. We make choices to do the right thing or the easy thing. We choose to stick to a conviction or cave in to compromise for comfort, greed, or approval. We choose either to follow the way of Jesus or, without anybody knowing about it, to crawl into a shrinking shell of safety.

Every day we make choices to either believe and trust in God, or we decide instead to cower in doubt and fear. The choices can come so rapidly that we find ourselves simply following the crowd, acting like anybody, instead of carefully making courageous choices.

You see, I believe that to be a Christian in today's world takes a great amount of courage. It's been that way in every age. Think back to the time of the Roman persecution of Christians and how much courage it took then to be a Christian. Maybe you've heard people say that

Christianity is for weak people and cowards. The exact opposite is true. In fact, a lot of courage is involved even in becoming a Christian. Jesus said that to follow him means to repent, to own up to your sins and mistakes. It means to begin to turn your life around. I contend that takes courage. To become a Christian, you have to have the courage to repent and speak the truth. Too often, we choose self over others, pleasure over service, greed over giving, hate over compassion, and envy over gratitude. It takes courage to act otherwise.

I believe it takes a great amount of courage to be a Christian today because it often means that we have to choose an alternative way from what the culture would have us do, and it takes courage to stand against the crowd. In many ways, the Christian faith is always counter-cultural. For example, our culture is constantly encouraging us to borrow, to spend, to buy, and to consume. It takes courage to stand against that temptation so our money can be used in alternate ways. It takes a lot of courage to promise to set aside a certain proportion of your money each week to be given to the church and to do that first, before you spend on anything else. Yet God has promised that when we do that, everything else will fall into place. This is what spiritual courage is all about.

It takes enormous spiritual courage to be on a pilgrimage with Jesus as your guide. Christianity is not for cowards.

And take a look at moral courage. How much moral courage must you summon to operate ethically and morally in the marketplace? There are strong temptations to cut corners, to make promises in order to get customers and then not be able to fulfill those promises on time. Greed has perhaps never been a more powerful force than it is in our time. There are many moral cowards in today's world.

How much moral courage does it take to control sexual temptations in a sex-crazed culture? It takes a tremendous amount of moral courage.

How much moral courage does it take to stick to a Christian conviction when almost everyone you meet tells you that you are hopelessly naive? Do you see a lot of moral courage being demonstrated today, or is it an endangered character quality?

It takes a lot of moral courage to raise children and young people today according to Christian values. How often I see parents today backing away from setting the proper example; parents who cannot say "no" to their children when they want to keep up with others and have the same material things that their friends have. It takes an enormous amount of courage to say to your children and young people, "We have different values as Christians." It takes an enormous amount of moral courage to stand against the culture when necessary.

Courage can take different forms. Some people need unusual courage to commit themselves to a marriage long enough to turn a difficult relationship into a permanent partnership in which two people can grow as separate individuals and deepen their oneness at the same time. On the other hand, a woman may need a lot of courage to leave a marriage that has become more brutal and demeaning than any human being should put up with.

I could go on talking about a number of different varieties of courage that are endangered — but the key question for us is — where does the kind of courage we are talking about come from? How does one become courageous? Where do we get the power to turn our backs on safety and comfort and do the very things we are afraid to do?

Courage has its beginning in that part of us which we poetically call the “heart.” In fact, our word “courage” comes from two French words that mean “big-hearted.” Courage is a power that surges from the heart into our wills and leads us beyond thinking and talking, and pushes us to do the right things when we are terribly afraid that doing it will cost us more than we want to pay.

But how does that power get inside the human heart and what sustains it?

Our Christian faith, with its Jewish roots, tells us that human courage comes from a force beyond the human will. It is a gift from God, the seed of which is in us from birth. But if that seed is to grow, it needs cultivation and continued nurture, and that means we have to remain in constant touch with the source of all courage — God.

A white school teacher described what she saw when Ruby Bridges walked into that school in New Orleans: “A woman spat at Ruby but missed; Ruby smiled at her. Then she walked up the stairs, and she stopped and turned and smiled one more time. You know what she told one of the marshals? She told him she prays for those people, the ones in the mob, every night before she goes to sleep.” It takes courage to love your enemies and pray for them, but when you begin to do that, you are also practicing and nurturing the God-given courage that is already present in you.

That kind of courage also comes from the faith and knowledge that God is with us when we do the right thing. In the thirty-first chapter of Deuteronomy, we find Moses speaking to Joshua on the banks of the Jordan River. The people are afraid. Joshua is afraid. Then Moses reminds Joshua and the people: “Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the Lord your God is the one who goes with you. God will not fail or forsake you!”

Courage does not mean that we are no longer afraid, but that we are able to go on in spite of our fear because of our faith that God goes with us.

And this faith in God comes to us in the beginning primarily from a faith community like the church. Nobody else can have courage for us. But behind individual acts of courage, there is usually a community of people. It is the community that remembers and passes on the story. And so today, that community of the Christian faith reminds us again, “to rekindle the gift of God that is within you...for God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control.” Amen.