

Courage

Second in a series on vices and virtues.

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I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord (Psalm 27:13-14).

On the front page of Friday's *Post Gazette*, there were no fewer than three stories about courage. A young Marine from Altoona saved the lives of 12 others, while sacrificing his own in Afghanistan. A state trooper was killed responding to a domestic violence call in Venango County. And two sisters from Ben Avon were in Haiti trying to find homes for orphans when the earthquake struck, but they won't leave the children, so they're appealing to family and friends for help.

Courage is one of the cardinal virtues because it drives some of the noblest human actions. It may be the virtue we admire most. We're moved by stories of people who do what needs to be done in spite of obstacles, opposition, and danger. When we hear about brave people we want to be like them.

We're tempted to think that courage means an absence of fear, that the brave are simply unafraid, but that's not true. In fact, courage only appears when there are good reasons to be afraid. Courage kicks in precisely when we face some threat, when something scary confronts us. Then we see what we're made of by the way we respond.

For nine years my family lived in Carlisle, which is, among other things, the home of the U.S. Army War College. I've gotten to know a number of military people, mostly Army colonels, and their families, and in the process I developed a great deal of respect for the attention the Army pays to the building character. In fact, I'm teaching a course at Pittsburgh Seminary this term on leadership in the local church, and one of the most useful books I've read in preparation is the *U.S. Army Leadership Field Manual*. I was struck by how much ministry and the military have in common – not in terms of our mission, but in our concern for character and a life of service.

Courage is, not surprisingly, one of the Army's core values. The Army says that courage "isn't the absence of fear; rather, it's the ability to put fear aside and do what's necessary." They distinguish physical courage from moral courage. Physical courage is "overcoming fears of bodily harm and doing your duty" – the courage that's rewarded with the Medal of Honor or the Silver or Bronze Star. But the Army says that moral courage, "standing firm on your values, principles, and convictions – even when threatened," is every bit as important, because situations requiring physical courage are rare, while the need for moral courage is a constant challenge of everyday life.¹

Courage, like all the virtues, is a matter of character. It becomes *characteristic* of those who practice it, a habit of the heart. The *Army Leadership Manual* is full of examples of soldiers who acted courageously when they needed to, because their character gave them no other option. That was just the kind of person they had become.

A person's character is formed by repetition. The whole concept of vices and virtues is that the more we repeat them, the more they shape our souls. Virtues shape us in ways that make us bigger human beings. They make us *magnanimous*, a word that literally means "great-souled," like the Indian *Mahatma*, as in Mahatma Gandhi. People that practice virtues become great souls, ultimately fit by the grace of God for the kingdom of heaven. Souls that practice vices become smaller and smaller, until at last they lose the very image of God in which they were made. That's why, in Christian moral theology, the habits of the heart are matters of life and death. The deadly sins eventually kill our souls. The virtues make us magnanimous.

Today we're focusing on courage as one of the cardinal virtues. The thing that makes courage possible, but also very difficult, is fear. If we were never afraid we'd never need courage, but the very thing that makes courage necessary, makes it hard.

Think of the things we fear. We're afraid of loss – afraid of losing friends, or loved ones, or jobs, or security, or status, or possessions. We're afraid of being alone. We're afraid of failure, and the loss of self esteem that goes with it. We're afraid of the unknown – which means change of almost any kind, and even fear of the future itself. We're afraid of losing control, though the control we think

¹The U.S. Army Leadership Field Manual (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 30.

we have is often an illusion anyway. We're afraid of sickness and suffering. And we're afraid of dying.

There are so many things to be afraid of that our lives are largely strategies for coping with our fears. So we surround ourselves with whatever helps us feel secure. We want to fit in, so we go along with what our friends are doing. We accumulate as much material security as we can. We don't venture too far from the familiar, from our proverbial "comfort zone." And we try not to think about the things that scare us.

All those strategies can work for a while. But sooner or later our strategies fail, and we come face to face with something we fear. Then what? What will sustain us when we can't hide any longer, when we're forced to confront the things that frighten us?

The answer, of course, is courage. Sooner or later we all need courage, because one day something we fear will catch up with us. Cultivating courage as a habit of the heart is so important because, the more we learn to face our fears, the braver we'll be when we meet the things that scare us the most.

And the more we'll accomplish in the meantime, and the more good we will do. Because it is fear that keeps people from doing much of the good that needs to be done in this world. Many people won't even invite a friend to church, even if church is very important to them and they think it would be good for their friend, because they're afraid of going out on even a little limb. How much more do people hold back from standing up for what's right, or getting involved in some important cause, just because they're afraid?

I've been promoting a couple of movies lately because they are stories about courage, and the world needs all the courage it can find. I like the fact that *The Blind Side* and *Invictus* are playing at the same time, because they're complementary films. In *The Blind Side* an affluent white family in the South goes out on a limb to support a talented young African American man, while in *Invictus* the black African president Nelson Mandela risks popularity with his base and enlists the help of a white athlete to do great things for their nation. Thank God we can go to the movies today and see stories where people are judged, not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

Tomorrow we celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday. His life was a story of courage too. Though he was stabbed and nearly killed, though reactionaries set

off bombs in churches to threaten Christians who dared to march for civil rights, though he went to jail and received threats against himself and his family, and though many people were cowered and intimidated by such tactics, Dr. King had the courage to persevere.

Long-time members of Westminster know that the civil rights movement intersected this congregation in the 1960s, when the founding pastor, John Galbreath, went to Selma to march with Dr. King. That took courage too, not only because there was some risk of being attacked by dogs and fire hoses during the march, but because there was an even greater risk of being attacked by unhappy church members when he returned. I understand that a majority of members here were either proud of John Galbreath's action or didn't say much about it, but there were a few who were quite vocal in their condemnation. They said the minister had no business getting involved in "political" things like the civil rights movement – as if the Christian faith had nothing to say about social injustice, or the values we preach should not actually affect the way we live.

Whatever else people might have thought about Martin Luther King, Jr., it would be hard to deny that he was a man of courage. He drew his strength from the Christian faith, and he saw himself, first and foremost, as a minister of the gospel. He drank deeply from the wells of scripture, and his life was shaped by the teachings of Jesus, the prophetic demands for justice, and the hope and consolation of the psalms:

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.
Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for
the Lord!

It was his confidence in the goodness of the Lord that gave him courage, his trust that he would see that goodness in the land of the living that made him unafraid of dying. For courage is, above all, overcoming the fear of death – not only literally but metaphorically, in the way that our fears inflict a thousand deaths upon the soul, even while the body lives on.

It was his freedom from the fear of dying, shaped by a lifetime of courage – though a short life of 39 years – that led Dr. King to give one of the most poignant speeches in our nation's history, the night before he was killed. His last public words were these:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.²

²Martin Luther King, Jr., *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed the World*; James M. Washington, ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 203.