

*“Moral Courage, Revisited”*  
Reverend Bill Gause  
Overbrook Presbyterian Church  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
January 29, 2017

**First Scripture Reading: 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 11:27b-12:7a**

**11** <sup>27</sup>But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord,

**12** <sup>1</sup>And the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, “There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. <sup>2</sup>The rich man had very many flocks and herds; <sup>3</sup>but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. <sup>4</sup>Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.” <sup>5</sup>Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; <sup>6</sup>he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.” <sup>7</sup>Nathan said to David, “You are the man!

**Second Scripture Reading: Acts 4:1-14**

<sup>1</sup>While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, <sup>2</sup>much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. <sup>3</sup>So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. <sup>4</sup>But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.

<sup>5</sup>The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, <sup>6</sup>with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. <sup>7</sup>When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” <sup>8</sup>Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, <sup>9</sup>if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, <sup>10</sup>let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. <sup>11</sup>This Jesus is ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.’ <sup>12</sup>There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” <sup>13</sup>Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. <sup>14</sup>When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition.



**Sermon: "Moral Courage, Revisited"**

A while back, Mary and I were watching the American Film Institute's presentation of the 50 greatest movie villains and heroes of all time.<sup>1</sup> Of course we got sucked in and couldn't go to bed until we found out who was number 1 some three hours later.

The Heroes list included all the usual suspects... John Wayne (Rooster Cogburn) (#36) was there.. Dirty Harry (#17)... Batman (#46)... Superman (#26)... Zorro (#45)... Gary Cooper's Will Kane from High Noon (#5). Arnold Schwarzenegger's Terminator (Hero #48, Villain #22) interestingly enough, was on both the heroes *and* villains list. The heroes list was full of characters who risked their lives; characters who looked death in the eye and refused to blink. But you know who was ranked as the #1 movie hero of all time?

Nope, not Indiana Jones (#2). Not Rocky Balboa (#7). Not (Ellen) Ripley (#8) from the Alien movies. Not even James Bond (#3)... although all of them were on the list. No, the greatest movie hero of all time is Atticus Finch (#1). Yes, Atticus Finch, from Harper Lee's classic Pulitzer prize winning autobiographical novel, "To Kill A Mockingbird."

Atticus Finch is a strong, quiet, depression era lawyer who lived in the sleepy little town of Maycombe, Alabama. He is a widower and the father of two children, Jem and Scout. Atticus Finch is asked to defend Tom Robinson, a black man who is accused of raping a white woman. Finch is peaceful, confident, just, fair, and a loving father who accepts the case even though he knows that the racial prejudice of the time will not allow him to win. His conscience and his sense of right and wrong will let him make no other choice.

Some people may find Atticus Finch to be an odd sort of character to be the greatest movie hero of all time. I mean, he doesn't kill anyone or blow anything up. He doesn't defeat an evil empire, lead a revolution or take on the Nazis. As a matter of fact, he doesn't even win. The one struggle in which he engages; the central plot conflict of the whole film, he loses.

Miriam Webster defines a hero as "one that shows great courage."<sup>2</sup> That's Atticus Finch. Perhaps his courage is not the same brand as say... James Bond or Indiana Jones, but it's courage just the same. What we usually define as courage in our society can better be termed "Physical Courage, while the sort exhibited by Atticus Finch is "Moral Courage." In a White Paper written for the Institute for Global Ethics in 2001, Rushworth Kidder and Martha Bracey discussed the difference between physical and morale courage. They say that "Physical Courage is the willingness to face serious risk to life or limb instead of fleeing from it." That's what John Wayne was talking about when he said that "courage is being scared to death – and saddling up anyway."<sup>3</sup>

Physical courage is that willingness to face threats to our physical safety and well-being. It is the soldier going into harm's way; the firefighter rushing into a burning building, the life guard diving into the roaring

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<sup>1</sup> "AFI's 100 YEARS...100 HEROES & VILLAINS." *AFI's 100 YEARS...100 HEROES & VILLAINS*. American Film Institute, n.d. Web. 03 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.afi.com/100years/handv.aspx>>.

<sup>2</sup> Mish, Frederick, ed. "Hero." Def. 1d. *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. 10th ed. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Incorporated, 1993. 543. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Kidder, Rushworth M., and Martha Bracey. *Moral Courage: A White Paper*. Institute for Global Ethics. Institute for Global Ethics, p 3, Web. 03 Feb. 2014. The full text of this paper is also available at [http://ww2.faulkner.edu/admin/websites/jfarrell/moral\\_courage\\_11-03-2001.pdf](http://ww2.faulkner.edu/admin/websites/jfarrell/moral_courage_11-03-2001.pdf)

surf. And it is also what defines some of the heroes of our faith. Think Samson slaying the Philistines with the jawbone of an ass or David facing the giant Goliath with a slingshot.

But then there's moral courage, which Kidder & Bracey define as "the quality of mind and spirit that enables one to face up to ethical dilemmas and moral wrongdoings firmly and confidently, without flinching or retreating.... If physical courage acts in defense of the tangible, moral courage is concerned with defense of the intangible. It is not property, but principles; not valuables but virtues that moral courage rises to defend. Acts of moral courage carry with them a risk of humiliation, ridicule, contempt, unemployment, and loss of social standing. The morally courageous person is often going against the grain, acting contrary to the accepted norm."<sup>4</sup>

By that definition of moral courage, Atticus Finch fits the "hero" description and as we find out in our New Testament reading this morning, so does Peter. When we last left Peter back in the Gospel of Luke, he was both hero and goat. It is Peter who impetuously strikes out with his sword when the soldiers come to arrest Jesus. Peter was the only one of the disciples to stick around after Jesus' arrest and he was the only one present in the courtyard during Jesus' trial. Peter's physical courage was evident. But when he is given the opportunity to stand up and proclaim his allegiance to Jesus, Peter's *moral* courage failed him and he denied Jesus three times.

But in this morning's account, something has changed. Arrested for publicly teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is resurrection of the dead, Peter and John are brought before the Council who demand to know: "By what power did you do this?" The author tells us that Peter, "filled by the Holy Spirit" answers their question by saying it is in the name of Jesus, "whom YOU crucified." Not content to give the simple answer, Peter also makes a statement indicting the rulers and the chief priests and the elders of the temple for their role in aiding and abetting the persecution, arrest and murder of Jesus. The author tells us that the members of the Sanhedrin were "amazed" at the "boldness" of these "two uneducated and ordinary men (v. 13)." What we see in Peter... is newfound moral courage.

It is the same moral courage which emboldens Nathan in our Old Testament reading this morning. Nathan is able to stand before the king, and tell him that he is wrong. What is the source of this moral courage that allows both Nathan and Peter to stand before the authorities of their time and proclaim what they believe to be true? 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel tells us that Nathan was sent to David *by the Lord* (12:1) and the Author of Acts notes that Peter was "*filled by the Holy Spirit* (4:8)." It is the power and presence of God that upholds the weak in spirit and gives moral courage.

But our society often seems to put a higher value on physical courage. Going back to the American Film Institute's list of the 50 greatest Movie Heroes for a moment; shortly after the list was released, MSNBC polled visitors to its website asking them which of the top three *they* would have chosen as the greatest movie hero: Atticus Finch, Indiana Jones, or James Bond? Only 22% of the voters chose Finch. 65% chose Bond and Jones while 13% chose "other." That's 65% for Physical courage... 22% for Moral courage.

Yet Kidder & Bracey tell us, the world of Physical courage is increasingly remote. In our world of modern conveniences and comfort, physical courage is not called upon as often by the average person. No longer is it necessary to risk life and limb in order to hunt food for our families or tame the wilderness to build homes and defend them from predators.<sup>5</sup> But the diminishment of the *need* for physical courage has not

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<sup>4</sup> Kidder & Bracey, 4-6

<sup>5</sup> Kidder & Bracey, 3

necessarily eliminated the *desire* for people to exercise that courage; which explains the tremendous growth in extreme sports like bungee jumping, mountain climbing, and hurling oneself out of a perfectly good airplane strapped only to a piece of nylon parachute. The desire to exercise one's physical courage drives even the most respectable persons to do seemingly foolish things. Former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill wrote in his memoirs that the reason he *volunteered* to fight for the Spanish in a guerilla war in Cuba at the age of 20 was that "it seemed to my youthful mind that it must be a thrilling and immense experience to hear the whistle of bullets all around and to play at hazard from moment to moment with death and wounds."<sup>6</sup>

But if the need for Physical courage has diminished somewhat, the need for Moral courage has only grown. We live in a world where the needs of the poor are dismissed. We live in a world where access to health care is seen not as a right, but as a commodity for those who can afford it. We live in a world where fear of terrorism is seen as a legitimate reason to turn away refugees who flee war and oppression. We live in a world where equal rights can still be denied you because of your religion, your gender, your sexuality, your skin color, your ethnic background.

In Matthew's gospel Jesus tells the story commonly referred to as the sheep and the goats. In it he says this:

*I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' <sup>37</sup>Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?' <sup>38</sup>And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?' <sup>39</sup>And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' <sup>40</sup>And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'*

Someone has to have the moral courage to stand up and say something. Someone has to have the moral courage to stand up and speak truth to power. Someone has to have the moral courage to stand up for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And that someone is us.

We recently celebrated the birth of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr.; a man who spoke out about injustice at a time when it was socially acceptable to openly discriminate and deny the rights of men and women because of the color of their skin. And Dr. King did so not by leading a violent revolution, but with words and ideas, by calling on people to stand up and oppose the ignorance and hatred of those in power who would use that power to oppress.

Now it would be incorrect to say that Dr. King and those who took up his cause never had to call upon their physical courage. They did. Often. But Dr. King was also an amazing example of moral courage; courage to work against the flow of public thought and opinion to do what is right and to advocate for the Gospel. And the source of that courage was his abiding faith in God who created all humans equally; who calls us to love and care for each other; who calls us to work to preserve the rights of the weak and oppressed.

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<sup>6</sup> Kidder & Bracey, 4

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 25:35-40, NRSV

So the question to ask is this: Do we have moral courage? Are we willing to allow God to speak through us? Are we ready to live as Christ calls us to live? To speak what Christ calls us to speak? To stand up for what is right, even if it is unpopular?

We know the stories of Dr. King and other heroes of the civil rights movement like John Lewis and Rosa Parks, but the experiences of those large historical figures can seem so inaccessible. So I want to tell you about Kaneesha Johnson. Kaneesha was a fifth grader from Hawthorne, California who noticed that African-American students and Asian students wouldn't play together in the playground and that some of the African-American students were bullying and taunting the Asian students. So Kaneesha, an African-American herself, crossed that invisible line and befriended some of the Asian students despite becoming an object of bullying herself.<sup>8</sup>

One small person. In a playground. Doing what is right - that's what Moral Courage looks like.

I think we all believe that if we pass a car accident on the way home today we will stop and help. Or that if we came across a burning building, we would run inside to save whoever is in there. But the fact of the matter is, we will probably never have that chance to do something that requires so much physical courage. But we will have thousands of opportunities to stand up for what we believe in... to live out the gospel message of Jesus Christ. To exercise our moral courage.

The Apostle Paul writes in Philippians, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me."<sup>9</sup> Which is what Peter and Nathan found. Where they were weak and uncertain, God's presence gave them the courage they needed to do that to which God had called them.

And God has promised the same to us.

Courage.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> "Johnson, Kaneesha Sonee." *The Giraffe Heroes Project*. The Giraffe Heroes Project, n.d. Web. 3 Feb. 2014. <[http://www.giraffe.org/option,com\\_sobi2/sobi2Task,sobi2Details/sobi2Id,613/Itemid,91/](http://www.giraffe.org/option,com_sobi2/sobi2Task,sobi2Details/sobi2Id,613/Itemid,91/)>.

<sup>9</sup> Philippians 4:13, NRSV