

What Would You Do If You Were Brave?

Acts 4: 23 – 35

First United Church of Christ, Northfield, MN

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September 27, 2020

May God still speak through these words of scripture and sermon.

The topic for this sermon is “What would you do if you were brave?” If you are a visitor today or a long-standing member I hope you will find this a provocative question for your personal life. But overall these words and this question are posed to us collectively as church.

As part of the work our Transition Team is doing to prepare the way for a new Senior Minister, we gathered some of the history of the congregation. And here is where I will pause for some caveats when it comes to dealing with history.

When dealing with history it matters who is writing it and for what purpose. As an example, drawing from a document that celebrated First UCC’s 75th anniversary in 1931, there is no mention of the history of the land before the “Old Brown Church” was built upon it. So even as I lift out pieces of our history that are influential on who we are today, there is, as our Moderator Janet Lewis Muth wrote recently, a commitment by the Council to “unmask our racist history.” So, with the undone horizontal work of confronting our own racist history as a congregation acknowledged I also want to point out that this congregation has **a line of bravery in its DNA!**

Even though no delegates came and only two voting pastors showed up to the Ecclesiastical Council in 1856 establishing the church within the Congregational denomination, the church persisted to meet the next day. In attendance were five men and three women who made a covenant of membership and sealed it by receiving communion. After relying for five years on the generosity of the Home Missionary Society to pay its pastor, and alternating between meeting in the Methodist Church and a schoolhouse, the congregation banded together in 1861 to build the Old Brown Church, purchasing the property debt free.

We have a line of bravery in our DNA! In 1866, on the heels of an economic depression post Civil War, but to fulfill a vision of members of the church, Charles Goodsell and Charles Wheaton each donated half the land to found what became Carleton College. The location of Northfield for the college was chosen because “the character of the church and the population as to intelligence, morals and religion is second to none” and that Northfield is “a fine place to which to send children from Christian homes.”¹

We have a line of bravery in our DNA! In 1880 the church building was destroyed by fire. A year later a new church building was built on a new location across from the school grounds “giving ample

¹ 75th Anniversary Booklet, First United Church of Christ, Northfield, MN

room for its activities and for its ministrations to the students of Carleton College.”² By the time the church was dedicated in December of 1881, every dollar of cost was in hand or pledged.

We have a line of bravery in our DNA! In 1909, while keeping the same focus on the spiritual needs of its members and religious activities, a “new emphasis, in sympathy with the spirit of the age, came to be placed upon the obligations of the church to the community, and particularly, its young people.”³ Additions to the building were made to foster a successful program of social community service.

We have a line of bravery in our DNA! In 1994, you were an early adopter of the United Church of Christ Open and Affirming stance in welcoming LGBTQ persons fully into the life and ministry of our congregation. In so doing, we extended hospitality by taking the bold step of proclaiming welcome and openness in ministry.

We have a line of bravery in our DNA! With a vote of the congregation, you became a committed member of ISAIAH, a faith-based community activist network working to effect transformation through collective action. A few years into that commitment you supported your previous Senior Minister in a run for statewide office hoping Pastor Todd could balance that calling with ministry here in Northfield. There is a lot more to say about that decision than can be held in a sermon, but it was a bold congregational move to risk a dream of marrying faith in the public sphere.

It makes sense that we have a line of bravery in our DNA when we consider the beginnings of the early church. In this story from Acts we find the disciples of Jesus navigating their way in carrying the faith forward. They are in the streets preaching the resurrection of Jesus and baptizing people who responded to their message by the thousands. By the way, resurrection is another way of saying the power of love is so strong even death cannot overcome it. Where we pick up the story they are praying for boldness. The context for their prayer is upon the return of Peter and John from being arrested and questioned by the religious authorities.

Peter and John’s preaching was effective but more than that, they were *healing* in Jesus’ name and the crowds were drawn to the results. In other words, people saw their inclusivity, their extravagant welcome and their gracious hospitality and wanted to be part of it. When the authorities told them to stop, they refused.

If you were facing the same leaders that had been a party to killing your beloved pastor what would you pray for? Would you pray to be invisible? Would you pray to find an escape hatch? Would you pray for your safety?

Putting myself in that situation I can see where any of these three frightened prayers would be very understandable, but they prayed for boldness! Peter and John were praying for the very thing that got them in trouble. Instead of praying for a way out, they prayed for enough bravery to be all in.

² Ibid

³ Ibid

These are the prayers of a people who believe in resurrection/new life. These are the prayers of a people that believe with God nothing is impossible. What would it look like to be a people who prayed like this today?

In a death-dealing world we have the most precious gift to give – life itself. In a world where lives continue to be at stake we are called to be outward facing and brave.

Remember, this Jesus, the one they were following was killed, executed by the occupying state and caused them to flee in fear, as well as betray and abandon their principles. So, it is no small matter that these disciples, spoke and lived boldly.

This fourth chapter of Acts charts the basic course of movement-making. It was (and is) a life afire to tell the story of Jesus with boldness and to be “of one heart and soul” holding all things in common so that the needs of the people are met. This love that moves toward the good for many is something worth telling as many people as possible and shaping your life around it.

What was the “why” of their bravery? They believed lives were at stake more than establishing and maintaining an institution- and we need to recapture that spirit for today. To reach new generations we need to be able to live out the question of “why” rather than “what.” This is Good News we’re talking about—life changing, world healing, saving news with eternal promises. It’s not the latest fad or trend. It’s real, and we have to be real about it” ⁴because lives are at stake still.

Let me tell you a story that illustrates how lives are still at stake in our world. In December of 2014, national staff from across the United Church of Christ were gathered in Savannah, Georgia for a bi-annual meeting. Our meeting coincided with the news of the non-indictment of New York City police officers involved in the death of Eric Garner. This was one week after the non-indictment of officers in Ferguson, MO and the killing, by police officers, of 12 year old Tamir Rice in Cleveland. Clearly communities in our country were reeling at this news. And there we were, United Church of Christ staff all gathered in one place.

What should we do?

For those who wanted to figure out something in that moment a special lunch was arranged and a challenge was issued - What would you do if you were brave? We self-identified into one of three groups:

1. Those who would answer that question from their own front porch once we returned home.
2. Those who would answer that question on the ground in New York City, Ferguson or Cleveland
3. Those who were feeling called to write – blogs, liturgy, sermons

In those groups, in a circle of 10-15 people we had a total of one minute to answer the question, with the last ten seconds counted down out loud – what would you do if you were brave? That was one minute for those 10-15 people in that circle. There would be no committee meetings to decide, no

⁴ Signs, Wonders & Movement-making. Lectionary reflection by Sharron R. Blezard, April 9, 2015

organizing – just commitment called forth in that moment in response to events where lives are still at stake and people of faith need to be heard and seen.

What would you do if you were brave? Do you know that even though that amounted to about 5 seconds per person to decide and state their brave response, every one of us made a commitment. I am still living into mine of enacting racial justice wherever I am serving.

When you marry your deep love for God with a passion and call upon your life – you can answer the question “what would you do if you were brave” in a matter of seconds.

Friends, it may or may not be around issues of race that First UCC is called to be brave, but I can guarantee you, that if we are committed to following the way of Jesus- some bravery, some boldness, some courage will be called forth. This is the work that is yet ahead as we refine our “Why” in this day and age - and it is not the work of “what do we need to do in order to keep on doing the things we have always done even though we may have forgotten why we are doing them.”

No, the work is to connect with the “why” of our existence and step into that “why” fully, boldly and bravely – not so that a building stands another 100+ years but so that the transforming power of Jesus Christ can be seen and understood through the lives transformed by this gathered body of people. The work is to reconnect to the “why” of our existence so that people in Northfield are overheard to say, “this is a great community to live in because of those good people at First UCC.” The work is to reconnect to the “Why” of our existence so that- the best of Jesus may be manifest in this community and beyond. May it be so!

Benediction-

My friends, receive these revised words of Philip Brooks as a blessing.

Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger people. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks. Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle, but you shall be the miracle. Live bravely, love boldly that the world may know God’s love through you. Amen.