

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 2, 2012, Pentecost 14, dedicated to Cori Rowley for her courageous vision to bring the Rose Window back to life at First Church, to Rev. Bob Tschannen-Moran as he battles for a return to health, to my brother Paul Ahrens and all the laborers through the years whose courage has guided the trade union movement in America, and always to the glory of God!

“The Sword of Courage”
James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15;
22-23

“Be strong and of good courage. Do not be afraid or dismayed”
I Chronicles 22:13b

Part VI of VI in the sermon series
“Shining God’s Light on
Hidden Christian Virtues”

Today we come to the last of the six Christian Virtues. God’s light has shined on the virtues of love, faith, hope, wisdom and justice.

I thank Rev. Earl Fritz for his sermon on love and his article that launched this series in the July newsletter. Thanks as well go to Tom Brownfield and Emily Bennett for their sermon on justice last week. I am deeply grateful to Rick Sayre for his availability to all of us each week to view the Rose Window in the Gallery of the sanctuary. And now for our sixth Christian virtue – “The Sword of Courage.”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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In the scene in which we meet the Cowardly Lion in the *The Wizard of Oz*, a fearsome King of the Forest confronts Dorothy, the Scarecrow and the Tin Man on the Yellow Brick Road. As the axe of the Tin Man, the toughness of the scarecrow and the protective nerve of Dorothy confront the Lion when he threatens her dog, Toto, it doesn't take long for the supposed King of the Forest to hide and cry with his tail between his legs. Wiping his tears with his tail, we learn that he dreads mice and he can't sleep at night. When the Tin Man suggests that he count sheep, the Cowardly Lion admits he can't do that because he is afraid of sheep. He is – quite simply - a cowardly mess.

As the Lion joins the others on to the road to the Wizard of Oz, he sings to Dorothy, *“Yeah, it’s sad, believe me, Missy. When you’re born to be a sissy, without the vim and verve. But I could show my prowess, be a lion not a ‘mowess,’ if I only had the nerve.”* With that, he is off to see the Wizard in search of courage.

Every one of us can identify with Bert Lahr’s well-acted Cowardly Lion. At some point or another in our lives, we have had to muster the courage to do something that seemed impossible. It might have been entering a room as a child where we believed a monster to be hiding in the dark. It could have been raising our hand in school to answer a question as we feared being wrong in front of our peers, or sharing a feeling or taking an exam or donating blood.

Courage is the energy; **it is the force** that puts all of our conscience and our values into action. Courage is there for everyone at all times. It is a force that does not discriminate. How we tap into the force that is courage is the question of our lives, because courage is the hidden virtue within each one of us (drawn

in part from *Facing Fear: The Search for Courage*, Robert Furey, Alba House, New York, NY, 1990, pp. 1-12).

Over the years, each one of us can point to one or more moments in our lives when finding courage within ourselves or witnessing courage outside ourselves made a huge difference to us. Sometimes those two are closely intertwined. Sometimes faced with difficult situations or decisions in our lives, we have stepped up and done the right thing. In so doing, we have tapped into the reservoir of courage deep within our souls. Or perhaps we have witnessed someone close to us in our family, our school, or our town who does something so amazing and extraordinary that we gain strength and courage from their actions. In the moment when courage touches us deeply and personally, we can be overwhelmed by its power and presence.

I remember a reporter in New York City late in the day on September 11, 2001. She had been on the streets below the twin towers covering that terror-ridden day's news. She remembered a cloud of gray smoke advancing toward her when out of nowhere, a NYC firefighter wrapped his entire body around her, covering her and protecting her as he took her to the ground shielding her from disaster and possible death. When the blast of smoke was past and it was safe to stand again, he helped her to her feet, asked if she was alright and then disappeared into the World Trade Center behind her.

Now 10 hours later, as she was reporting the story of her protector, she began to stammer and stutter and then started to cry on air as she was overwhelmed by what she realized for the first time. Her 9/11 savior had gone into the towers, up the stairs, into the smoke and fire and into the jaws of certain death in order to save even more people that morning. As the reporter pulled herself together, she said, *"He saved me. He saved others. I am sure he didn't save himself."*

When we encounter courage like this up close, it changes us.

Courage keeps you true to yourself. Your courage drives you to make a point and get to the point. Courage doesn't make things easier. It makes them possible. And it is important to remember that courage doesn't imply the absence of fear. Instead it insists that we do what we believe is right in spite of our fear. Courage doesn't remove fear so much as it helps us act in the face of our anxiety.

In this regard, courage and cowardice have the same underlying feeling – fear. Still a clear difference exists between courage and cowardice. A coward's first priority is to remove the fear and often to act out against others in the face of his fear or to run from others in the face of their need. The opposite is true of courage. A courageous soul's first priority is to do what is right – to act in a way that will assist another and help them in their time of need. Someone with courage saves lives and does it selflessly in the face of personal fears.

Recently, at Congregation Tifereth Israel, I heard Rabbi Harold Berman speaking on the Psalmist's cry to God not to disappear from us in our hour of need. We cry to God and ask where God is when we most need God. We fear that God is not present. We fear that God has disappeared.

But, rarely do we ask ourselves where we have gone on the days of our lives when people need us most. You see all of us have been in situations where we “disappear” in a time when we are needed. Someone's car breaks down, someone's call goes unanswered, and someone crying out is not “heard.”

We are not bad people. But, we all, at times, have disappeared. So when we cry out to God, calling upon God to be present, we need look no further than our own disappearing acts to see where God has gone. We are God's hands and feet; God's hearts and souls; God's courage and action in times of need. When we “disappear” the very presence of God disappears as well. When we are courageous and appear in times of need, God's presence is felt and known.

Fear is not our foe. In the Garden of Gethsemane, on the eve of facing his death, Jesus was fearful. He cried to God from the agony of his fears for the hours that lay ahead. Courage is possessed by the person who estimates the fear-causing situation, but summons all his or her resources and meets it. Courage comes by doing courageous things when we want to run away, when we want to disappear. It could be the child going upstairs toward the dark to face the monsters that await him or her or the soldier or firefighter whose impulse to dash into enemy fire wins a medal of honor for bravery – as was true of our deeply beloved and now departed Walter Kropp.

To have courage, to live in courage, I encourage each of you to do this . . . set before you in your mind's eye 50 times a day if need be, a picture of the REAL God, utterly loving no matter what we have done, infinitely strong, resourceful and purposeful, finding this way for us when that way is closed for whatever reason. Imagine our God who will not allow us to be lost or defeated, who is not a disappearing entity, but a presence that is generous, giving and loving beyond belief. Every morning, let us commit ourselves to this REAL God who can be trusted – no matter happens to us, no matter what failures, defeats or catastrophes we face – this REAL God can be trusted to hold on to us, to bear us to her bosom, so that we can find our way home with no regrets.

When we enter into a relationship with our generous, trusting, and loving God, we will discover not only that our God doesn't disappear, but that our God points us toward courage. It is our ever present God who speaks to us – in the words of I Chronicles - *“Be strong and of good courage. Do not be afraid or dismayed.”*

So, come to the table of our Lord this day. Come in your fears and encounter the unconditional love of God in Christ Jesus. In the body and blood of Christ, we become overwhelmed with this truth – through the giving of his whole being to us in the darkest hour of human existence – his death on the cross – we are granted courage to face all our fears and do what is right in this world.

In the love of Christ, given to us at the table of life, the Lord's Table, we are strengthened by all the virtues of Christian faith – love, hope, faith, wisdom, justice and courage – and so much more. Come to Christ's table – *“show your prowess. Be a lion, not a mowess,”* because you already have all the courage you need. Recognize it. Claim it. Live into it. When you do this, courage will never be a “hidden” virtue again. Amen.

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