

## Sermon June 19, 2005

**EVANGELICAL COURAGE:** A Sermon by Dan Stern Romans 6: 9-11 & Matthew 10:26-31 & 38-39.

We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

-Romans 6:9-11

Have no fear, for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered; there is nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, fear the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid! You are of more value than many sparrows.

Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

-Matthew 10:26-31 & 38-39

Most of our lives we've tried, as people of faith with integrity must, to walk our talk. We call that discipleship. Lately, since God IS still speaking, we've been trying to learn to better talk our walk as well. We call that evangelism. Today let us be encouraged to go both one further, to do more than just walk, as if our faith commitment were but a leisurely stroll, and much more, certainly, than just talk. For starters, as the Filipino folk hymn we just sung puts it, we're to SHOUT the name of the One who sets us free from fear and sin, the One who broke even death's power with love, the One who lives that all might live. Brothers, SING, sisters, LEAP with JOY! That kind of exuberance alone suggests something very exciting going on here! And when or to the extent we're lacking that contagious exuberance, I wonder: do we have any idea what kind of POWER we're working with here?!

My own personal testimony to you is this: when I am truly in touch with the power and joy of the word made flesh and dwelling among us, I can hardly do anything BUT shout and leap and sing. If you can identify with my testimony in the least, do indeed feel free to leap and shout while singing our concluding hymn this morning! We are, after all, wonderfully made, and in Christ, wonderfully called! How can we KEEP from singing...AND shouting that Good News?!

And yet...true discipleship is not JUST a song and dance either. True discipleship is a costly grace, and evangelism, a fearful calling. Discipleship means nothing less than walking the talk of Jesus. Loving God and neighbor, through thick and thin- it is a COSTLY calling. And evangelism means publicly talking the walk, unashamedly shouting the name, boldly laying claim to the source. The Great Commandment to love, and the Great Commission to proclaim the Good News- These are not optional buy-ins. And neither discipleship nor evangelism are complete without the other. If we cry 'Lord, Lord!' without love, we are mere noisy gongs and clanging cymbals. AND if we live godly lives, but never shout from the rooftops our invitation so also to live, then our purity is a secret and a selfish thing.

What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light, says Jesus; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops!

When we lack courageous uninhibited enthusiasm for both walking our talk and for talking our walk, the lethargic remains of the church consist of ...the walking dead. At first hearing of today's text from Romans 6, one might think we're supposed to be the walking dead! Paul says we SHOULD be dead..."dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." Dead...and alive, at the same time? Like those condemned on death row, maybe? (Bill O'Brien:) I heard once about a man who thought he was dead. When his wife asked him to carry out the garbage, he would answer, "I can't, I'm dead." Finally in exasperation she asked him if he thought dead men could feel pain. When he responded negatively, she pinched him as hard as she could, to which he blurted out, "Well, what do you know, dead men CAN feel pain!"

Obviously this man had been interpreting his Bible verses just a bit too literally- walking away with just the opposite of their intended meaning too. The Romans text calls us to be dead...to fear and SIN, yes but ALIVE...to "proclaiming the gospel to all the world and accepting the cost and joy of discipleship" (UCC Statement of Faith). For us to be most truly, joyfully alive, perhaps the virtue most needed of all is courage.

The Bible, someone once claimed, tells us exactly 365 times, in one form or another, to 'Be not afraid'. Obviously it's the way we're meant to be every day-unafraid. Someone else said that it's the definition of a saint to be 'one who is uninhibited'! We are, more than anything else, inhibited by our fears. We fear what others will think or do if we stand up and stand out and take on an unpopular stand.

I hope you noticed in the June-July United Church News, and later will check out the message on the back of today's bulletin, which introduce the phrase, 'evangelical courage'. Evangelical courage is a phrase our UCC general minister and president, John Thomas, has been using a lot of late, along with that other phrase he coined, 'extravagant welcome'. Thomas feels that together, these phrases more adequately describe our unique calling as a progressive Christian denomination. Yes, our welcome must be extravagant, and apparently it is becoming so- at least, on a google search of the phrase 'extravagant welcome'. nine out of the first ten references return to UCC-related webpages. But without courageous, disciplined follow-through, there will be little in our churches to be welcomed INTO. Thomas: "As we invite people into the UCC, we need to make it clear that we're inviting them into something significant. We need to say and show people that faith requires being involved in the big things of life. The 'Stillspeaking Initiative' is not just about welcoming people to a friendly community, but to a courageous discipleship, to a particular set of commitments. It's not an 'extravagant welcome' to an anything-goes-religion, to a comfortable form of Christianity, but to a costly form of discipleship."

UCC theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once said that what we most need in the face of the dominant religious, cultural, and political norms is 'a touch of daring'. Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel called it having 'spiritual audacity.' And now John Thomas is calling it 'evangelical courage'- the ability to take a faithful stand, even when it might make someone angry. Think of those of our congregations who held regular public peace vigils during the run up to the Iraq War, even in areas of the country where to do so was extremely unpopular. Think of those who have been out front concerning public funding of education, who have presented alternatives to young people bombarded continually by military recruiters, who have challenged the anti-gay position of the Boy Scouts, or who have consistently witnessed against the death penalty.

As Christians, we are called to engage in quite specific, often difficult tasks having to do with making peace and demanding human decency- *in the name of Jesus*. We're doing so in a society dominated by powers which are extremely hostile to the making of peace and the effective proclaiming of fairness and human rights- in the name of Jesus. Such discipleship 'goes against the grain'. So when it is practiced with both courage and effectiveness, the powers that be visibly rage with fury and, I believe, secretly tremble with fear. Do you all know the stories of faith heroes like Martin Niemoeller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, of those Christians who, *in the name of Jesus*, nonviolently resisted the Nazis instead of collaborating with them, even to the point of death? Do you who are Jewish know that the Talmud says that the Exodus miracle at the Red Sea was never mainly about the parting of the waters? The REAL miracle was the one solitary Jew that first stepped into the place where the waters had parted! Courage! What a concept! And how it is lacking in much of the church today. But not everywhere.

I mentioned in our prayers last Sunday that two prominent church leader/activists in the Philippines were assassinated earlier this month. In the past two months, six members of the UCC in the Philippines have been ambushed and/or assassinated, and more than 50 have been victims so far this year alone. One of those murdered this month was Rev. Edison Lapuz, the Conference Minister of the Northeastern Leyte Conference of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. A group linked to both reactionaries within the church and to the military claimed responsibility. They called Rev. Lapuz 'an enemy of the state'. The group claimed they needed to 'cleanse and purge' the church of so-called 'leftists'; - it was part of a pattern of intimidation, and recently, of actual systematic elimination of progressive church leaders whose 'crime' was having been both faithfully and effectively committed to justice for the poor and marginalized of the Philippines. Rev. Lapuz had viewed the death threats he had been receiving to be an attendant risk to his prophetic calling. Our UCC Global Ministries Board Area Executive for East Asia writes, "Prophets may be killed, but the prophetic voice can never be silenced. For every life unjustly taken, many more will rise after them..."

Meanwhile, closer to home, I wonder: how can we sit back and allow someone like House Majority Leader Bill Frist go unchallenged when he tries to define what Christianity is supposed to mean for all the rest of us? (Lately) "I've grown more (not less) ready (and willing) to be sharp in the way I say things," says UCC President Thomas, "Because I think that helps others to come to a decision-making place for themselves." And the integrity of the church itself, its whole purpose and mission, is at stake. Someone's going to have to keep showing society GUTSY discipleship! Priorities have to shift! And will- I'm convinced of it. A Pro-life agenda that is not a faux Christian agenda WILL have something to do with those billions of kids who don't get proper nourishment or decent education, a REAL pro-life Christian agenda will have something to do with the economic concerns of all those working poor dads and moms, all those unemployed, all those uninsured, all those with serious health problems that can EASILY be remedied when compassion again has to do more with law than it does with mere charity. As we effectively shift these priorities, we'll def the counter-priorities of those in power- *in the name of Jesus*. It WILL have cost us something.

By the way, I don't think most ordinary people who are inclined toward the religious right are insincere or bad people. Nor are they necessarily unintelligent. I DO think, however, that many of them are being manipulated. Jonathan Swift once opined that we tend to have just enough religion to make us HATE each other, and not enough religion to make us HATE each other, and not enough religion to make us LOVE one another! Too many of us are getting manipulated with hateful, carefully-dosed out doses of the very thing that can LIBERATE us- religion. Empires have always been good at manipulating people's fear and

using common religious inclinations to their own selfish advantage. Power elites manipulating the religious landscape of America today would have us all believe that God's five biggest priorities surely are creationism vs. evolution, partisan prayer in public schools, and strict opposition to abortion, porn, and the so-called homosexual agenda. Have you ever noticed that none of these five priorities have anything at all to do with anything that COSTS the federal government ANYthing?! And have you noticed how often the so-dubbed 'pro-LIFE' priority has nothing at all to do with life AFTER birth?!

A seeker once went to his spiritual master, and asked, tell us, o wise one, the answer to the greatest spiritual question of all: "IS there life after death?" And the master replied, "Oh no, the greatest spiritual question is not 'is there life after death!'" The greatest spiritual question is: 'Will any life take place AFTER birth and BEFORE death?'

Last Sunday we already spoke of being both fearfully and wonderfully made and called of God to walk in the way of discipleship- and of how heeding that call, walking in that way, isn't a cakewalk. We noted that Jesus pulls no punches in letting us know exactly what we're up against. Today we're reinforcing that message with the central paradox of Christianity: "Take up YOUR cross, and follow...for those who LOSE their life for my sake will FIND it."

Besides, "Don't you know, queries the Apostle Paul, 'That ALL of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into death?' We were buried with him through baptism into death, IN ORDER THAT, just as Christ was raised from the dead...we too may live a new life." It doesn't mean that we all have to be martyrs. It DOES mean that living that new life with integrity WILL require of us a lot of death-defying courage.

Even WHEN on those occasions that the good are literally put to death, in midst of our own outrage and grief, we will yet leave room in our hearts for the prayer of Walter Brueggemann, "We give you THANKS that you are a calling God, who calls always to dangerous new places. May we be among (your fearfully, wonderfully made children) who believe your promises enough to keep responding to your call." 'Have no fear.' You who lose your life for my sake will find it. Bring the truth, however ugly the lies, into the light of day: 'For nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered; there is nothing secret that will not become known. What I counsel you in the dark, tell in the light; what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul....Not even one sparrow will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And you are of more value than many sparrows. Be not afraid!

A sung prayer:

Come and fill our hearts with Your peace...You alone O God are holy

Come and fill our hearts with Your Peace...Alleluia!

Come and fill the world with Your peace...

Come and fill our hearts with Your love...

Come and fill the world with Your joy...