

Just Courage: 4. Power of One
Matthew 5:14-16
September 29, 2019
Pastor Steve Richards

Courage is bravery in the face of fear. Courage means you don't give up. It is strength in your heart, and it is a gift from God. In our lives, we all walk to certain point and many of us remain there - not ready, not willing, somehow not able to venture beyond our comfort zone. Fear holds us inside. But there is a path of adventure that leads beyond the "Visitor Center" (comfort zone). But it takes courage. You and I get to choose – to keep going or let fear win. Courage is the strength to keep going – and it is a gift from God.

Late one September night a year ago, several us waited at the baggage claim area at the airport for the arrival of Okunyi and her four children, Akenyi, Akera, Michelle, and Gabriel. It was the completion of a long journey that began in 2005 when Okunyi fled her home in Ethiopia and eventually making her way to Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, the largest refugee camp in the world. But it would be another 13 years until she reached the baggage claim area of MSP.

Hers is a story of courage in the face of circumstances beyond her control; a story of faith that never gave up hope. Okunyi has come from another world as foreign and as distant to most of us a planet from another galaxy. It is hard to relate, and yet anyone who is a parent knows the moment of crisis when you would do anything for your child. Okunyi speaks three languages. English is not her first language. It is not even the language that she speaks at work, so we will need to listen carefully. As you listen to her story, listen for that moment when you feel something inside.

[Okunyi told her story. There is no printed text, only video.]

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Jesus said: **You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can't be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house.** What Jesus had in mind was a lamp like this (small clay lamp). Oh so fragile, but with a light so strong that if you put it on a lampstand it would illumine the entire house. You and I are the lamps – oh so fragile. And yet, God is ready. God is ready for the light to break through. God is the fuel. God is the electricity that is seeking a lamp. You and I have been given the power to make someone's life better with something we say or something we do. You may never see the impact. Some people never live long enough to see that they are part of a story bigger than themselves. But this morning, I wanted you to hear in Okunyi's story that the light shines – and fueled by the presence of Christ, we have been the light that connected us to something greater than ourselves.

What did we hear two weeks ago? Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God. In this world of need, God is ready. God is ready with the power. All God needs is a lamp. We are often tempted to stay inside our comfort zone – let someone else be the light. Hide is under a bushel? No! I'm going to let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine. That's courage!

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of September 29, 2019

Weekly Prayer: Gracious God, we thank you for the ways your mercy is present in our lives. Arouse within us such joy in serving you and others, such compassion for those who are hurting in this world, that we will not remain silent and will not accept life as usual. Convict us in our comfort, and inspire us to let your light shine through us to bring about the kingdom you envision. Amen.

Monday, September 30

Scripture: Matthew 5:13-16

“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again? It’s good for nothing except to be thrown away and trampled under people’s feet. You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can’t be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.

Observation: Jesus taught his followers to be the world’s “salt” and “light.” These two images show us key qualities that are needed in this world and that Jesus needed his followers to be. Salt enhances food’s flavor, and can also help preserve it. Light destroys the darkness, revealing all the beauty of God’s world and helping those who may have been lost to find their way.

Application: Have you ever flown over a city at night? Or come out of a long, dark tunnel into the bright light of the sun? Even when astronomers dislike “light pollution,” it is because they want to be able to see the light of distant stars. What are the dark corners of your family, your workplace, your neighborhood, and your world which need to experience the light of God? What can you do to help shine God’s light into these dark corners?

Prayer: God, as I go about my life today, keep me ever mindful of the people who need to find your light in their world. Fill my heart with love for you so overflowing that I cannot keep it hidden. Amen.

Tuesday, October 1

Scripture: 2 Kings 5:1-8

Naaman, a general for the king of Aram, was a great man and highly regarded by his master, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. This man was a mighty warrior, but he had a skin disease. Now Aramean raiding parties had gone out and captured a young girl from the land of Israel. She served Naaman’s wife. She said to her mistress, “I wish that my master could come before the prophet who lives in Samaria. He would cure him of his skin disease.” So Naaman went and told his master what the young girl from the land of Israel had said. Then Aram’s king said, “Go ahead. I will send a letter to Israel’s king.” So Naaman left. He took along ten kikkars of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing. He brought the letter to Israel’s king. It read, “Along with this letter I’m sending you my servant Naaman so you can cure him of his skin disease.” When the king of Israel read the letter, he ripped his clothes. He said, “What? Am I God to hand out death and life? But this king writes me, asking me to cure someone of his skin disease! You must realize that he wants to start a fight with me.” When Elisha the man of God heard that Israel’s king had ripped his clothes, he

sent word to the king: “Why did you rip your clothes? Let the man come to me. Then he’ll know that there’s a prophet in Israel.”

Observation: A Syrian general named Naaman had a feared, seemingly hopeless skin disease. One sign of how seriously he took the disease was that the haughty general was willing to accept a suggestion from a captured Israelite slave girl. A nearly comic string of faulty notions followed. Naaman went to Israel’s king, not the prophet (verses 5-6). That king seemed unaware of the prophet’s presence in his land, and thought the Syrians were looking for a pretext for war. One of the Bible’s unsung heroes is the unnamed Israelite girl in this story. She had been dragged from her home by raiding soldiers, and taken to a foreign land, but she still wished good for Naaman and pointed him to the source of help.

Application: If you were in Naaman’s shoes, how likely would you be to listen to an idea from a foreign slave girl? Are there people in your life, perhaps even neighbors, whose ideas you discount without even seriously considering them? Might God ever try to reach you through one of those unlikely people?

Prayer: Loving God, I want to become more and more like the amazing girl in this story. Help me to desire your good for all the people I deal with, and to know how to point them to you. Amen.

Wednesday, October 2

Scripture: 2 Kings 5:9-15

Naaman arrived with his horses and chariots. He stopped at the door of Elisha’s house. Elisha sent out a messenger who said, “Go and wash seven times in the Jordan River. Then your skin will be restored and become clean.” But Naaman went away in anger. He said, “I thought for sure that he’d come out, stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the bad spot, and cure the skin disease. Aren’t the rivers in Damascus, the Abana and the Pharpar, better than all Israel’s waters? Couldn’t I wash in them and get clean?” So he turned away and proceeded to leave in anger. Naaman’s servants came up to him and spoke to him: “Our father, if the prophet had told you to do something difficult, wouldn’t you have done it? All he said to you was, ‘Wash and become clean.’” So Naaman went down and bathed in the Jordan seven times, just as the man of God had said. His skin was restored like that of a young boy, and he became clean. He returned to the man of God with all his attendants. He came and stood before Elisha, saying, “Now I know for certain that there’s no God anywhere on earth except in Israel. Please accept a gift from your servant.”

Observation: When things got sorted out, and Naaman finally came to the prophet Elisha, he expected a fairly elaborate, formal religious ceremony (verse 11). Offered a different, simpler approach, he prepared to go home in a huff. Rather bravely, his servants finally convinced him that there couldn’t be any harm in trying the simple way by bathing in the Jordan. God healed him in that unexpected way.

Application: Have you ever tried to tell God just how to help you? Read again the Syrian general’s words as he prepared to storm back home, still sick: “I thought for sure that he’d come out, stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the bad spot, and cure the skin disease” (verse 11). Are there any parts of your life where you are resisting “bathing in the Jordan” because you’d like God to work in a different way?

Prayer: Lord God, open my eyes, my ears and my heart to all of the ways you are at work in my life. Keep me from letting my expectations blind me to your chosen ways to help and heal me. Amen.

Thursday, October 3

Scripture: Matthew 9:9-13

As Jesus continued on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at a kiosk for collecting taxes. He said to him, "Follow me," and he got up and followed him. As Jesus sat down to eat in Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners joined Jesus and his disciples at the table. But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard it, he said, "Healthy people don't need a doctor, but sick people do. Go and learn what this means: *I want mercy and not sacrifice.*^[a] I didn't come to call righteous people, but sinners."

Observation: Tax collectors like Matthew worked with Israel's Roman occupiers, collecting taxes (usually excessive) from their fellow citizens. Matthew was an outcast from respectable society. So imagine the type of friends he had, who came to his house to eat with Jesus! Jesus clearly, even shockingly, welcomed and loved people like that, individuals the "righteous" people of his day called "sinners." (For another example of his behavior, see Luke 7:36-50.) Jesus refused to neatly separate the human family into "good" and "bad" members—he aimed to extend love to all.

Application: When Jesus said, "I didn't come to call righteous people," who were the people he had in mind? Was he saying he actually considered those people "righteous," or was he saying ironically that THEY thought they were "righteous"? Is anyone, including you, so righteous that you do not need Jesus' loving, merciful acceptance?

Prayer: Loving Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. Help me to see others, especially my neighbors, through your eyes, which lit with love and compassion at the sight of a "sinner." Amen.

Friday, October 4

Scripture: Mark 5:25-34

A woman was there who had been bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a lot under the care of many doctors, and had spent everything she had without getting any better. In fact, she had gotten worse. Because she had heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his clothes. She was thinking, If I can just touch his clothes, I'll be healed. Her bleeding stopped immediately, and she sensed in her body that her illness had been healed. At that very moment, Jesus recognized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" His disciples said to him, "Don't you see the crowd pressing against you? Yet you ask, 'Who touched me?'" But Jesus looked around carefully to see who had done it. The woman, full of fear and trembling, came forward. Knowing what had happened to her, she fell down in front of Jesus and told him the whole truth. He responded, "Daughter, your faith has healed you; go in peace, healed from your disease."

Observation: As Jesus moved through an unwieldy crowd to respond to one appeal for help (see Mark 5:22-23), he sensed that another desperate person had touched him in a way that drew on his healing power. It was a woman whose problem would be serious today, but was worse then. Jewish law (Leviticus 15:25-27) saw her as permanently "unclean," like a leper. She

was forbidden to touch anyone; hence her secretive touch of Jesus' garment. But "Jesus recognized that power had gone out from him," and confirmed that her faith had made her whole.

Application: What a burden of shame this woman must have carried, along with her physical issues. Many people saw ailments like hers as judgments from God (see John 9:2) and treated her as an unclean outcast. Imagine the courage it must have taken for this woman to approach Jesus. Was Jesus being unkind when he called the healed woman forward—or was he freeing her from shame as well as from her physical disorder? Are there things in your life or others' lives that you/they are trying to keep hidden?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, it was your mission to move the world back towards its intended wholeness. Show me how to join in that mission, in big or small ways, to bless others. Amen.

Saturday, October 5

Scripture: 1 John 4:7-12, 19-21

Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love. This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins. Dear friends, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. If we love each other, God remains in us and his love is made perfect in us.

We love because God first loved us. Those who say, "I love God" and hate their brothers or sisters are liars. After all, those who don't love their brothers or sisters whom they have seen can hardly love God whom they have not seen! This commandment we have from him: Those who claim to love God ought to love their brother and sister also.

Observation: As John wrote about how we human beings treat one another, he likely thought about himself and Jesus' other disciples. They jockeyed for position, and got angry with one another at times. Yet as they continued to walk with Jesus, he re-shaped their thoughts and actions. John knew from his own experience that loving others with Christ's love doesn't spring from a naturally warm human disposition. This kind of active love comes from God, "because love is from God."

Application: John said, "No one has ever seen God," but he went on to say, "If we love each other, God remains in us." There is a song that says, "You're the only Jesus some will ever see," and that was what John was driving at. As your capacity grows to take in God's love, to see yourself as loveable in God's sight, how does this give you courage to change the way you see and relate to others?

Prayer: Dear God, you know that it's not quite as natural for me to love as it is for you. Please keep loving me as I stretch and grow in my ability to reflect your love to others. Amen.