

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
September 12, 2004

“Courage is Contagious”

“I am the Lord, who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness
in the earth; for in these things I delight.”
~Jeremiah 9:24

Mary Robinson, the former President of Ireland, was once asked how citizens could resist the kind of bullying politics by which the United States forced her out of her position as United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights after she had questioned the current Bush administration’s insistence on excluding Afghan prisoners of war from Geneva Convention protections.

“People need the courage to stand up for what they believe,” Robinson replied. “If I’d backed down just because the United States is the most powerful nation in the world, it would have sacrificed all the moral credibility of my office. By standing up, I preserved it. You have to keep standing up even if it’s hard. You have to be willing to pay the costs.”

This is a woman who turned what might be seen as a platitude – do what you think is right – into a living, breathing reality, one that perhaps challenges us this morning to reflect upon when we and under what circumstances, would be willing to take a stand. What would it mean for us to apply her message to our own lives? For one, it would require that we speak out in contexts in which some people disagree with us, possibly vehemently, because that’s the only way social change takes place. Sometimes dissent draws heat. Our gospel text from Luke reminds us how Jesus courageously spoke out in his own cultural context: It read: “the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

Courage requires persistence, even when the climate turns harsh, political or otherwise. Whether a shepherd looking for one lost sheep, a woman searching for one elusive coin, or a political leader’s decision to challenge U.S. policy, that’s the additional implication – courage requires persistence, even in the harshest or most difficult of circumstances.

These days, I’ve been thinking considerably more broadly about courage. What it means as a citizen, a nation, a soldier, a political candidate, a parent, a widow, a child, a religious leader – to possess courage. From every point of understanding, every experience, every perspective, there’s another. I’ve been thinking more about this beloved country of which I, if not many of us here today, am a citizen. Between two political conventions and campaigns, a presidential election 51 days away, 1,000 American military women and men and countless Iraqi lives dead, and the 3rd anniversary of the horrific events of September 11 - it’s been difficult for me to get beyond courage and country.

Needless to say, I also have to admit that I vacillate between feeling hopeful and hopeless, powerless and powerful, discouraged and encouraged. How did we get here?

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What can we do? What can I do? Dare I say, yes I'm a citizen, but I'm also a preacher in a pulpit. What to do with that responsibility? I love my country and my God but what do you do when your country continues on a course where you think your faith and your God don't want you to go? How do we have intelligent, thoughtful, moral, spiritual conversations during these times without being branded anti-patriotic, traitors, self-loathing Americans? Or better yet, religious liberals? How do you preach?

One of my favorite preachers not too long ago asked: "Must the first casualty of patriotism always be dissent, debate and discussion?" He confessed that we are in a frightening time, more so than anytime in his memory. "If one cannot speak out of Christian conscience and conviction now, come what may, then we are forever consigned to moral silence. We hear much talk of "moral clarity" but it sounds to me like moral arrogance, and it must not be met with moral silence."

Speaking of conscience and conviction, a recent and particular act of courage comes to mind. Some of you may have seen it. Featured on August 30 as a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times*, its bold headline declared: ***God Is Not A Republican Or A Democrat.*** It was a response to conservative religious leaders' claims that God has taken a side in the November election and that Christians should vote only for George W. Bush. Purposefully, the ad's objective appeared to offer an alternative vision and understanding of Christianity by reminding its readers that all candidates should be examined by measuring their policies against the complete range of Christian ethics and values. The ad enumerated several texts from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures that caring for the poor and vulnerable, the environment, war and our call to be peacemakers, truth-telling, human rights and respecting the image of God in every person, our response to terrorism, a consistent ethic of human life – are all religious issues. Further, the ad read: "Uncritical affirmation of policies and assertions that Christians vote for a particular candidate constitute bad theology and dangerous religion." The ad admonished both parties and candidates to avoid the exploitation of religion or our congregations for partisan political purposes and call Christians and all people of faith and religious belief to a more thoughtful involvement in this election, rather than claiming God's endorsement of any candidate. "This," concluded the ad, "is the meaning of responsible Christian citizenship."

I was inspired by this ad, and its *courage is contagious* for me as a Protestant Christian, one who preaches, teaches, and has allegiance to Christianity specifically. I must confess that I have grown weary, embarrassed and often stifled into silence over the barrage of language and examples that plops Christian believers particularly into the same basket of conviction and conscience. I am not willing to meet this barrage with moral silence. As a Christian who takes seriously her allegiance to the person of Jesus Christ, it is my business – and my right – to live as a Christian citizen responsible for her country and her society.

What is it then that will help us be conscientious citizens, faithful Christians and authentic religious practitioners? What ought to be the proper relationship between love

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of God and love of country? Are these mutually exclusive or is it possible, somehow to live responsibly in the tension between those claims?

Our text from Jeremiah that Karen read for us might help with these questions. Wisdom, might, and riches are set in clear opposition to love, justice and righteousness. This creates for us a certain self-conscious biblical tension that is not easily resolved.

Peter Gomes, Professor of Christian Morals and Minister in Harvard University Memorial Church says this:

“Jeremiah knows that we are inclined to boast of our wisdom, particularly in the university, and that is what the Hebrew word that is translated as “glory” really means: boasting, and the thumping of our intellectual chests. We know how to do that about wisdom in the university, and we know how to boast about our might and our riches in this land of opportunity. Jeremiah knows that it is our natural penchant to seize upon and celebrate our achievements, for they define who we are, what we have, and what we do. This is the way of the world, and when we are number one in the world, it is our way or the highway.”

Gomes helped me think back on the stimulating days of the Cold War, when the threat of another dangerous superpower actually helped to make us behave and believe. “The prophet,” he declared, “does not deny the reality of these claims, but over and against them sets God’s claim of love, justice and righteousness.”

“Jeremiah is unambiguously clear here. If we as God’s people are to glory in anything, we must glory in – that is, we must boast of, take pride in and responsibility for – the things that God values, that God loves, and that God blesses.”

Asks Gomes: Why should God bless America if America does not bless the things that God delights in? What are they?

Let us consider them again from the Jeremiah text: “Let you who glory, glory in this, that you understand and know me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight says the Lord.”

If we do not delight in the things that God delights in, why should God should delight in us? It doesn’t fit on a bumper sticker, but we might ponder that in our hearts and minds.

What are our values anyway? Anthony Lewis, formerly of *The New York Times*, said in an address to a very startled congregation that if the purpose of the terrorists of September 11, 2001 was to destroy our confidence in our own American values, he feared they had succeeded. In the name of fighting terror at home and abroad, we have created a culture of patriotic intimidation, suspended our constitutional liberties, stifled dissent, and defined a good American citizen as one who goes along with the powers that be.

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It was Edmund Burke, Irish orator and philosopher who later became one of the foremost political thinkers of 18th century England that said: “To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely.” Many of us consider our country to be lovely, which is why we love it and are willing to serve it and if necessary, to die for it. It is because of that love that we dare to speak to affirm the goodness and righteousness in it, the virtue and the power in its core values, and to speak against that which would do harm to those core values.

“What is and has always been lovely about our country” wrote Peter Gomes, is our right and our duty to criticize those in power, to dissent from their policies if we think them wrong, and to hold our alternative vision to be fully valid as theirs.

What is lovely, I might add, is that an advertisement can appear in a national publication like *The New York Times* as it did and articulate a very different vision of what has been an especially divisive issue – the interpretation or appropriateness of religion and religious belief in the public square of politics.

The *contagious courage* in this and countless other examples of ordinary citizens doing extraordinary things does remind me that wisdom, might and righteousness must yield to love, justice and righteousness. Love, justice and righteousness are superior to wisdom, might and riches. How often must we be told that? These things in which God delights, and in which God’s people are meant to delight, may seem thin and feeble. I do, and many others too, love my country enough to see it complicit in one of its worst stereotypes. That is, as an irrational and undisciplined bully who acts because it can: we make up the rules as we so choose.

Right after September 11 we asked with agonizing perplexity, why do they hate us? Remember that? Most of us will admit that over the course of these months and years, our proclivity to war, destruction, and arrogance has intensified and made manifest that sentiment more than we care to admit.

But, three years since, I do believe that we are not without guidance or without hope. Courage is contagious and it is evident in these days in the acts of ordinary citizens. Protests, community and national organizing, political volunteerism, untiring, unheralding activists. Calls to non-conformity and transformation. We have a duty, and have spoken courageously to dissent and to demand a better case for compromising our most fundamental principles as not only Christians or religious practitioners, but as citizens. That in the deepest part of our collective consciences the soft values of love, justice and righteousness should prevail over the hard even though they often do not. This takes mighty acts of courage, over and over again. The contours of what we’ve accomplished may not be apparent until long after we take action. Whether we’re striving toward personal or political change, if we take sufficient risks and leaps of faith, and persist long enough, our courage can spread. It can be contagious.

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I was reminded recently as well that acts of courage never seem outdated or irrelevant. Take for example that of Nurse Edith Cavell, one of whose claims to fame was that in the early morning hours of October 12, 1915 she was tied to a stake in German occupied Belgium and shot as a traitor. Long before WW I she headed a nursing home in Belgium, and even after the war had broken out she gave care to injured soldiers regardless of nationality – German, French or English. She was arrested as a traitor for the crime of assisting soldiers in their flight to neutral Holland. The Germans tried her under military law and without adequate counsel she was presumed guilty. Cavell was sentenced to death and executed within hours of the judgment. While the debate about her so-called crime has gone on for years, there has never been any debate about the courageous nature of her death. Her last moments, her final words, are described as follows by an eyewitness:

After receiving the sacrament, and within minutes of being led to her death, she said: “Standing as I do in view of God and eternity, I realize that patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness toward anyone.”

Cavell took the offensive and overpowered evil with good. That is courage that can be contagious and is radical foreign policy. Granted, most of us are not going to follow a path similar to those who take the highest risks and pay the highest costs for their beliefs such as Mary Robinson and Edith Cavell did. But we can use their deeds as a call to do what we can, in our own way, according to our own abilities and circumstances. We are all needed, the heroic few and the humble many, whether our acts are performed center stage to cameras and thunderous applause or in the wings, heralded by none but friends, colleagues and family.

Nurse Cavell was, and is still right. Patriotism is not enough and courage is contagious. If we wish to be on God’s side rather than making God into our own exclusive ally, it behooves us to remember our text from Jeremiah. God’s values are clear. The question is – are we clear about our values?

“Let not the wise glory in wisdom, let not the mighty glory in might. Let not the rich glory in riches, but glory in this – that you understand and know me, that I am God who practices steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight.”

If we love God, we will love the things God loves. Amen.

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