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“Contrast Society: From Conformity to Courage”

Romans 8:29-30

I would love to show you a 30 second video clip of the cowardly lion in “The Wizard of Oz” this morning as we talk about courage. Perhaps you can imagine it with me. Actor Bert Lahr dressed as the cowardly lion with curly brown hair and then a straight hairy mane over his fuzzy lion costume. He wore a green crown stuck lopsided on his head with only one ear sticking out. He was animated in nervousness and yet ready to meet the Wizard so that he could be given “Courage”. He explained it to the Tin Man, Scarecrow and Dorothy with a slight lisp:

“Courage!

What makes a king out of a slave? Courage!

What makes the flag on the mast to wave? Courage!

What makes the elephant charge his tusk in the misty mist, or the dusky dusk? What makes the muskrat guard his musk? Courage!

What makes the sphinx the seventh wonder? Courage!

What makes the dawn come up like thunder? Courage!

What makes the Hottentot so hot? What puts the "ape" in apricot? What have they got that I ain't got? Courage!”

One of the reasons we can watch “The Wizard of Oz” over and over again is that it pokes fun at issues that we hold close to our chest. The Cowardly Lion is something we can laugh about... but we know inside that we too often succumb to those around us and do not stand up with courage.

Being a Christian has always carried with it a call to stand against the cultural norms. For the first Christians, faith brought with it a very real risk of death. To be a Christian meant putting faith before any other aspect of life, including:

- Vocation (the fishermen walked away from their livelihood to follow Jesus)
- Security (there were no guarantees for Jesus followers... many were imprisoned and some were stoned to death)
- Family (When his family was waiting on him, Jesus asked, “Who is my mother; who is my brother” and identified those around him as his true family)

The cultural norms have changed for us. But being a Christian hasn't changed the fact that we are to live in a way that is resistant to the culture. We are called to live with extraordinary courage to live in ways that are counter-cultural. This counter-culture was taught by Jesus when he was speaking about the Kingdom of God. In modern times, Christians have reframed the idea of the Kingdom of God as an explanation for the way things are in heaven. However, Jesus' stories and teachings were obviously about an application of these principles in the everyday world – in the here-and-now. These were not pie-in-the-sky ideas... Jesus truly believed in an alternate way of living and taught these Kingdom of God principles through parable, story, and personal action.

We've been talking about the Kingdom of God principles taught by Jesus for several weeks now. Each week, I've contrasted a natural human tendency with an alternate way from the Bible. Some of you have noted that the human tendencies of fear, anger, woundedness & conformity are not necessarily bad. In fact, they serve legitimate functions for emotional health. And that's true. But Jesus didn't teach or advocate for these human tendencies. He taught a radical, counter-cultural way of living in the world where human emotion and response had to be put aside in order to bring about the community God envisions. Today we are talking about the human tendency of conformity and the counter Biblical concept of courage.

Last year, I buried a 30-something young man – the first murder victim of 2012 – who stepped into an argument between a man and a woman he did not know, defending the woman. He was stabbed to death for intervening. That’s where the Christian story rubs against us. Following Jesus can get you killed, literally. Having courage isn’t always a safe proposition.

Bullying has become an increasingly problematic part of the American culture. We talk about it being in the public schools. But let me tell you, children learn that behavior from adults. I’ve seldom seen as many bullies among our national and state elected officials. How they behave – regardless of party affiliation – is dreadful. And it must stop. As Christians, we are to be on the forefront teaching and promoting and behaving in ways that put an end to bullying. But it takes extraordinary courage.

Last week, we talked about the scripture in Romans that reminds us not to be “conformed by this world... but rather to be transformed by the renewal of mind”. Today, we continue in Romans 8:29-30. Paul tells the Romans not to be conformed to the culture... but to take courage as God’s own children.

“God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. God decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him. After God made that decision of what his children should be like, he followed it up by calling people by name. After he called them by name, he set them on a solid basis with himself. And then, after getting them established, he stayed with them to the end, gloriously completing what he had begun.”

What matters, says Paul, is our relationship with God. From that relationship, we receive affirmation of our true identity. When we know who we are at our core,

we can be courageous and bold in our lives because we enjoy all the rights and privileges of heirs.

As C.S. Lewis said, “Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.”

http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics/topic_courage.html#Q7jbreAX8KvxJVlw.99

Be transformed because you are a child of God. Work toward a shift in the cultural norms – become part of Jesus’ contrast society. Be courageous in faith. Step out against the values of this world. Where you see injustice, say something! Thomas Jefferson knew the importance of this when he said, “One man (*sic*) with courage is a majority.”

http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics/topic_courage.html#ARIK7fKOWPQiz5xW.99

Romans chapter 8 is probably, according to the commentaries, the greatest passage actually written by Paul that survives intact. Even compared to the gospels and all other Christian literature, this text is the longest lasting and continuous text we have. In this whole chapter, Paul tells us the details of the possibility for new life in Christ. We are free from the constraints of life – free from the junk that makes us feel stymied and hopeless. We don’t have to live that way.

Instead, we are to change our ways.... Change our mindsets... accept that we are God’s own. We are free spiritual beings and we live with the promise that nothing can take our freedom away. In this freedom, then, we are asked to live as Christ – with courage and boldness.

The text for today tells us that God has ALREADY justified us and glorified us. The Greek is in past tense. Our glory is in the here and now. We wear it as a part of our identity. There is no need for you to go along the yellow brick road looking for courage, or wisdom, or a heart. Jesus has already taught us how to have these things.

Perrin & Duling, “The New Testament; an Introduction” 2nd edition, p. 195

Danny Cox, a former jet pilot, wrote "Seize the Day", and notes that when jet fighter planes were first invented, they were much faster than the propeller-powered planes. That meant that pilot ejection had to become a more sophisticated process. In theory, all a pilot needed to do was push a button, clear the plane, then roll forward out of the seat so the parachute would open.

There was only one problem: They found out that pilots, instead of letting go, often kept a grip on the seat. The parachute would remain trapped between the seat and the pilot's back. And so, the engineers worked on a solution. The new design called for a two-inch webbed strap. One end attached to the front edge of the seat under the pilot. The other end attached to an electronic take-up reel behind the headrest. Two seconds into ejection, the reel would immediately take up the slack, and force the pilot forward out of the seat, freeing the parachute and ejecting the pilot.

The moral of the story is that humans are often tempted to hold onto what is familiar and secure, even when it is not in our best interest. A device is needed to launch us out of our seats, so that we can be saved from ourselves.

Preaching Today.com "Perfect Illustrations", pp. 46-7.

This week, find ways to be counter-cultural... to be courageous... and to demonstrate your confidence that you are God's own child!