

OPENING TO THE SOFT SPOT -- 9 A DIFFERENT KIND OF COURAGE

(10/16/16)

Scripture Lessons: Numbers 13:1-3, 17-33; 14:1-10
Matthew 4:18-25

So they brought to the Israelites an unfavorable report of the land that they had spied out, saying, "The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great size; to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers."

This morning we are continuing the theme we began in our worship services this summer. As you recall, we began by considering the metaphor that was offered by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians—the metaphor of being armed for battle against ones foes. If we think of our “foes” as not only external enemies but also internal enemies, the demons that haunt us and draw us off center, we need to consider if the best way to engage in this struggle, the struggle of light vs. darkness, is from a position of defended strength.

There are times in life when we need to take on a challenge. There are times when we need to step outside our comfort zone. There are times when, if we are to be ourselves fully, to be the individuals that God calls us to be, we have to initiate or accept change. Life often calls for a special kind of courage. Life is not for the faint of heart.

In the Beatitudes Jesus offers a different metaphor, a different way to meet the challenges that life sets before us. He asks us to have faith, to trust enough to be vulnerable. Even when the challenges that face us are daunting, he calls us to step forward into them with confidence and in humble acceptance of God’s will, knowing that we do not walk this path alone.

The ancient Israelites often viewed the challenges that they faced as insurmountable obstacles. Because of their lack of faith, they backed off from challenges they needed to face. They paid a heavy price for this, as do we when we back off from the challenges of life.

Our Old Testament lesson illustrates this theme. Jacob had twelve sons, of whom Joseph, the eleventh, was his father’s favorite. Joseph’s jealous brothers sold him to merchants who took him down to Egypt as a slave. Through his ability to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams, Joseph was able to help the Egyptians prepare for a famine. This gave him status with Pharaoh and enabled him to help his own family survive the famine by inviting them to live with him in Egypt.

As generations passed, the Egyptians no longer remembered Joseph’s great deeds and no longer honored his descendants. They treated the Israelites as slaves. The Israelites had no

identity, no land of their own, and were in danger of losing their religion, their sense of God's special covenant with them that was originally given to them through Abraham.

In response to God's call, Moses stepped forward to lead his people out of Egypt. To persuade Pharaoh to let his people go, God visited ten plagues on the land: the waters of the Nile turned to blood; frogs, lice, and flies covered the land; the cattle died; the Egyptians were afflicted by sores; hail and fire rained down from the sky; locusts devoured the crops; darkness fell upon the land; and finally the angel of death killed all the first born Egyptian children but passed over the Israelite children. This is the origin of the feast of the Passover. Pharaoh finally agreed to let the Israelites go, but then changed his mind and was destroyed when the Red Sea miraculously opened to allow the Israelites to pass, only to close on their Egyptian pursuers.

For the next forty years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness area that is now Saudi Arabia. They were often tempted to turn back to Egypt where, though they were slaves, they at least had a place to live and something to eat. Moses and Aaron struggled to strengthen the people's resolve and keep them moving forward. God fed them with manna from heaven, quail which mysteriously appeared, and water which flowed from the rock. As one of the crowning moments in religious history, Moses received a face-to-face revelation of God's will for his people in the Ten Commandments that were codified in the area of Mt. Sinai.

But the Promised Land was not yet theirs. It had to be conquered, to be taken away from the Canaanites, a people about whom the Israelites knew nothing. Like a good general, Moses set up camp at the foot of the mountains that separated them from their goal and sent out spies to explore the territory, to bring back the information they needed to formulate a plan of action.

The spies went across the mountains to reconnoiter the enemy territory. Instead of bringing back a plan of action, however, they brought back a plan of inaction. They said that the Canaanites were so big that compared to them the Israelites felt like grasshoppers. Faced with this discouraging report, the Israelites decided not to attack. Joshua and Caleb wanted to push on, but the people were so frightened, so determined to retreat that they almost stoned them.

As a consequence of their decision to back off from the challenge that lay before them, the Israelites spent an additional forty years in the wilderness. Forty more years before they were able to have a land and an identity of their own. Because of their cowardice, Moses was not allowed to enter the land he had worked so hard to reach; he died just before they entered.

The author of this passage, who lived around 800 B.C.E., realized that his descendants had been punished for not having the courage to push on, for turning back when they were within sight of their goal. God visited them with no more than the full consequences of their cowardice. To be sure, the spies' report was discouraging, but the people should have known that God was with them in their journey, that God had promised them a land of their own, and that God would strengthen them for their battles, just as he did later with little David in his battle against Goliath.

This story is a lesson in human nature. When the spies returned their report, the Israelites became discouraged. To be discouraged is to lack courage. The way we view challenging situations determines our behavior. Many Israelites died in the wilderness during the second forty years, just as many of us die physically or emotionally because we are unable to muster enough courage to take the step forward that we need to take in our life.

Like the ancient Israelites at the time of the Exodus, we need courage to step forward into the serious life challenges that we face as individuals.

It takes courage for many of us to face the day. We may feel caught or stuck in a difficult life situation. We may be struggling with an addiction that threatens to destroy us and is already hurting those whom we love. We may not feel adequate to cope with our family situation, our difficult children, our aging parents. We don't need to be fully armed, fully prepared for these battles; in fact, we probably couldn't be. We need to remember that God is with us, and that if we trust in God we will discover the strength we need to carry the heavy load that life has placed upon our shoulders.

It takes courage to deal with ageing, with declining health. We may feel our strength slipping away. The loss of our hearing or eyesight may confine us to an increasingly smaller world. We need to remember that God is with us, that God works for healing, that God gives us the strength we need to make the adjustments we need to make in the various seasons of our life.

It takes courage to work through conflict in a marriage. It takes courage to be honest about what is happening and what is not happening, to face the reality of a situation, to pull away the veils of rationalization and denial. It takes courage to face ourselves, to see our part in the conflict, to see the work that we need to do to bring about the change that needs to take place. We need to remember that God wants us not only to live in loving relationships, but also to live a deeply meaningful and fulfilling life as individuals.

It takes courage to face the future. We may be young, not knowing how we will connect with the great stream of life, not knowing if we will be able to connect in a meaningful or fulfilling way. We may be middle-aged, facing uncertain times and the threat of financial instability. We may be elderly, uncertain what the future will bring, perhaps facing it alone rather than with the companionship of that person we loved and who was a part of our life for so many years. We need to remember that God is with us, that God will guide us through that still small voice within and also through the guidance and the caring presence of our friends.

It takes courage to face change. We may need to change in response to a situation that we did not initiate. If we do not change, do not adapt to the new situation, our life will come to a screaming halt. Sometimes we are the ones who need to initiate the change; we need to step out of our comfort zone into unknown territory. Whether it is adapting to a change that has been forced upon us or initiating a change that we know is necessary, we should remember that God is with us. Throughout history, God has both initiated change and helped people rise to the challenges that life has placed before them. This is how life evolves.

It takes courage for us as a church to face the future. Many mainline churches in our time are struggling or in decline. Many are pulling back from their sense of mission to the community to marshal their energies for self-preservation. They recoil from challenges of change; they cling to the old ways, the old patterns, the comfortable rather than the challenging. Churches advertise that they want a minister who will be a change agent, but then they resist or undermine everything he/she initiates.

Life places challenges before us. What we see as insurmountable obstacles, however, may really be challenges in disguise. When we back off from the challenge of life, we oppose a vital instinct within us--the need to grow and evolve, to be God's ongoing creation. Something deep within us calls us to this as individuals and as a church. It calls us to leave the suffocating fortress of security for the challenge of moving forward into the future.

As individuals and as a church, let's not spend an additional, unnecessary forty years wandering in the wilderness. Let's take on the challenges that life places before us. Let's step forward into the changes God calls us to undertake. Let not our condemnation be that we were within sight of our goal but backed off because we thought of ourselves as grasshoppers.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough -- www.firstcommunitychurch.com
October 16, 2016*