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THE SPIRITUAL HABIT OF COURAGE Michael B. Beough
Mark 1:16-20 October 5, 2008
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In our church right now, we are talking about the spiritual life and the way the Holy Spirit guides us in forming certain spiritual habits of the heart. These habits form paths that lead us closer and closer to God. They also fill that longing that most of us have for a meaningful life.

Today and this week in our Growth Groups, we look at the spiritual habit of courage. I like this habit because it reminds me that the spiritual life is not about safety and comfort and sitting around praying all day and thinking nice thoughts. It is not about wimping out on life, floating off with our heads in the clouds.

It is about stepping out into new possibilities for our lives. Taking risks that we would never take otherwise. Here is the way I see it. *God creates each of us with unique talents. Jesus calls us out to adventures that require the talents we have, and the Holy Spirit gives us the courage to risk taking the first step.* We find our true selves in this willingness to risk what we have always been in order to become something God has made us for. That's my story and I'm sticking to it!

To help us catch the flavor of the spiritual habit of courage, I want to contrast two stories in the Bible.

The first story involves a young man.

Perhaps you have heard of this young man. The Bible describes him as a rich young ruler. **(Matthew 19:16-22)** Obviously well-dressed. Probably well-educated. Has a beautiful house in the Southlake district of Judea. He normally wouldn't be caught dead talking to an itinerant faith healer like Jesus. Not in public. But something has been eating on this young man. It is one of those inside things that you do everything you can to avoid. But over time you learn that you can't avoid it or drown it out or make it go away. At some point you have to make peace with it. And it might drive you to extremes to find an answer.

So out here in a place called Judea beyond the Jordan River, Jesus is healing people and teaching them about God's love, and this dapper young man walks up with dust collecting on his wingtips and the sun glinting off his shades.

His sense of self-importance probably explains why he starts his conversation with Jesus rather abruptly. He is used to taking the initiative with people and demanding their attention. At least he has the courtesy to address Jesus as "Teacher," but there is no time for small talk. You get the

feeling this young man is almost desperate. He wants to know now why he is so empty inside. He does not want to waste another minute living a life that frankly leaves him wondering whether he really matters.

He comes right out with it. "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" What can I do to make sure my life adds up to something?

And do you know what Jesus says to him? Keep the Ten Commandments. I can imagine the young man's face falls with grave disappointment. He thinks to himself, "This is no help. I have heard this sermon so many times I can repeat it in my sleep. I have been keeping the Ten Commandments all my life. I don't smoke, and I don't chew, and I don't go with girls who do." And you know what? That's what he tells Jesus. "I've been so clean all my life, I squeak, but I'm still lost."

Jesus looks at this young man in his Armani suit and gold watch, and sweat dripping off his face onto his dusty wingtips, and it suddenly hits him. Jesus can see it as clear as day. He knows exactly what this rich young ruler needs to do to have the peace he is looking for, to gain a sense of the meaning of his life. Jesus looks him in the eye, and with a sincerity that reveals Jesus' love for this young man, he says to him, "Go sell all your possessions and give them to the poor, and then you will have great treasures in heaven. Then come follow me."

Guess what that young man does? What would you have done? What would you do if the Lord of life stood before you today and told you to do something that was the last thing on earth you would ever want to do? You would probably do what this young man did. It says he turns his back on Jesus, and walks away sadder than when he came, because he has great possessions.

Let me tell you what I think that young man was lacking. He was lacking courage. Jesus asked him to risk all he had for the Kingdom of God, and he did not have the courage to take the first step. He was afraid.

Here is what I wonder. I wonder what he might have accomplished if he had accepted Jesus' challenge? Where would God have taken his life? He obviously had talents for managing people. He was a ruler. He knew how to manage money. He had great wealth. What could he have accomplished for the Kingdom of God? What glory might he have experienced? What joy? What purpose?

This is a sad story because it describes all of us. We so often choose to live in the cocoon of our fears. Tightly wrapped up. Or the cocoon of our prejudices. Or the cocoon of our distractions. Or the cocoon of our doubts.

It is sad, isn't it, when we notice someone wasting their talents. It is sad when Jesus calls us to something new and exciting and we shrink back in

fear - when the Spirit nudges our hearts and we wrap that cocoon tighter around us.

Here is the contrasting story.

One day, Jesus decides to walk down along the water's edge where men are throwing nets into the Sea of Galilee. It is the main industry that provides most of the income for these maritime families. He watches the hustle and bustle of fishing life. Some men in their boats not far off the shore pulling in nets filled with fish. Others coming up empty. Swear words lace the air. He hears the rough laughter of men mending nets and telling the most outrageous stories you wouldn't tell in mixed company. And the sellers calling out. "Fish for sale." "Get your fresh fish here." And the women haggling over prices and children running in and out of the water's edge, splashing with not a care in the world. A fishing village. An ordinary way of life. From father to son the fishing trade gets passed down. And life goes on one day like the next.

It is to this seaside village Jesus comes to find those who might join him in a mission that will change lives and alter the world. He spots two men casting their net into the sea. They look enough alike to be brothers. Just as they are pulling up an empty net, he yells to them, "Hey, come follow me and I will make you fish for people." What did he say? Peter and Andrew look at each other. They look behind them. "You mean us?" "Yeah, you, both of you." Maybe it was the humor on Jesus' face, in his voice. Maybe it was the empty net and empty boat. It doesn't say why, but it does say they immediately drop everything and follow Jesus.

Then Jesus spots two men in a boat mending their nets. He is going to need some menders for his mission, men with patience who know the value of keeping the fish from slipping through God's net. And they too drop everything and follow Jesus, leaving the business for their father Zebedee to run along with their hired hands.

There must be more to the story than what we get in the Bible, but what a contrast to the rich young ruler. He counts the cost and gives up the one thing that can fill that emptiness in his life. The fishermen never give it a second thought. They abandon all to follow Jesus. Talk about a risk! Talk about courage! Talk about what these men and women like them eventually accomplished! A world-wide movement of risk-takers who have travelled the entire earth to tell of God's saving love.

Why did these fishermen do that? Maybe they were just risk-takers. Some of us are and some of us aren't. If you had asked them on the spot why they did it, I am not sure they would have had a good answer.

Here's the truth. They didn't know why, not until several years later. Not until Jesus was crucified, raised again from the dead, and ascended into

heaven. They didn't know it until later that whenever we find the courage to take a risk to do something new or more fulfilling or more like heaven on earth it is because of the Holy Spirit working in our lives. *For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. (2Timothy 1:7)*

The stock market swoons. Businesses collapse. People lose their jobs. Somebody do something! Save us! Get us back to our sense of security and comfort! But then there might be a different response for those who are guided by the Holy Spirit. What if in all this uncertainty and collapse the Holy Spirit is trying to get through to us? Empty nets? Empty boats? Hey, you two, come follow me! I have something else for you to do. All it requires is everything you have, all your life, all your love, all your longing.

Do we have the spiritual habit of courage? God wants to break us out of our cocoons so we can fly with the angels. When we fly with the angels, we glorify God

Doing and becoming what we are meant for is the secret to the peace, purpose, and promise that we believe is God's vision for every one of us and for His whole creation.

With courage, let us take that first step today.