

Profiles in Cowardice

Hebrews 11:1-3, 29-39

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, (Aug. 21) 2022

Kyle Childress

In 1956, Senator John F. Kennedy published *Profiles in Courage*, containing eight short biographies of United States members of congress who had exhibited bravery and integrity when in congress. Among those eight was Sam Houston, when he was a senator from Texas voted against the Kansas-Nebraska act of 1854 which would have decided the national slavery question in favor of slavery. Houston's vote was considered his most unpopular vote and would cost him re-election the next year. A few years later, Houston was able to be elected governor of Texas again, but he opposed Texas seceding from the United States and was forced from office.

John Quincy Adams was profiled for his courage. The only man to have been President of the United States and then elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, Adams opposed the Mexican War and opposed Texas becoming part of the Union because it was about spreading slavery. He consistently stood against slavery throughout his political career. His outright opposition to slavery was a major contributing factor to his not being re-elected president in 1828.

Some people really would rather be right or do right than be president (to paraphrase Henry Clay, another political leader from that era). Some people, in politics, in life, in family, and in the work of

making this world a better place, exhibit courage. Where are those people today? We need individual persons, elected officials, and we need small communities of faith who act with courage for the common good of all people.

The great biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann, has recently suggested that “we are in need of a counter-collection of ‘profiles in cowardice,’ an account of individual persons who have refused to take risks or to act boldly for the sake of the common good.”

Profiles in courage and profiles in cowardice. A standard rule of thumb definition of a coward is someone who allows fear to control their lives. By contrast, a courageous person is someone who does the right thing, even when they are afraid.

How do you become a person like that? How do we become a congregation of courage? Even when filled with fear, how can we be people who act courageously? Furthermore, what difference does it make to us who live rather ordinary lives?

Our reading from Hebrews 11 is known as the “rollcall of the faithful.” This is the Hall of Fame of those in Old Testament history who were faithful to God and, in turn, exhibited great courage and great fidelity. Told are the bold exploits of Abraham and Sarah, Joseph, Moses, and Rahab. Then at verse 32, the writer adds, “And what more can I say? I don’t have time to talk about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets.” They stood for justice, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, put foreign

armies to fight... they were tortured, mocked and flogged, put in prison, stoned to death, sawn in two, went around in animal skins, destitute, persecuted, tormented – and on and on.

By telling us these stories of courage and faith, the writer is hoping we too will be courageous and faithful. It is an old and ancient truth, that we learn to be courageous when we hang around courageous people and we become more faithful by hanging around others who are faithful. Likewise, we learn to be forgiving by being around others who practice forgiveness. This is one reason why Jesus calls us to be part of a community of disciples.

Verse 32 mentioned the name of Gideon. Gideon's story is found in the book of Judges 6-8 and Israel's long-lasting conflict with the Midianites. Midian loved to raid Israel, especially during harvest season, stealing crops and livestock, destroying what they could not steal and in various ways, constantly harass Israel. In turn, Israel hid their produce and crops in the hills and tried to do things in secret, at night. Israel was barely surviving, and they were beset by fear.

The reason this book of the Bible is called Judges is because at this time, Israel was simply a loose confederation of tribes. They had no central governing authority, no king. Now, if they were threatened, and if the threat was great enough the leaders of the tribes would convene and seek God's will for a temporary leader, a prophet, sometimes called a "judge."

So, God sends an angel to Gideon, who is trying to be scarce, keep his head down and be out of harm's way. The angel says that God is with Israel. Gideon says, "If God is with us, how come all these bad things are happening to us?" (Judges 6:13). The angel says, "God is commissioning you to go deliver Israel from the Midianites." And Gideon responds, "My tribe is the weakest in Israel, my clan is the weakest in our tribe, and I'm the weakest member of my clan. We're small. I'm small. You're going to have to give me a better sign that you're commissioning me. I'm afraid and my people are afraid."

So the Lord, through the angel, gives Gideon a sign but Gideon is still afraid. Eventually, reluctantly Gideon acts by destroying an altar to Baal and then builds an altar to Lord God. Yet, he does all this in the middle of the night because it says Gideon was afraid of his family and the townspeople and what they might say or do (6:27). Everyone is afraid and their fear is contagious. In turn, if someone like Gideon begins to act faithfully and courageously, people react harshly. When people are afraid, they do not like their idols messed with – and it doesn't matter if it is Baal or guns or capitalism.

Nevertheless, in the face of his fear and the people's fear, Gideon leads, and the people begin to respond faithfully to the Lord God. Throughout this story, Gideon is constantly asking for a sign, for reassurance, for encouragement. He takes a tentative step, then asks God for a sign. Then takes another. Meanwhile, the Midianites and the Amalekites, the enemies of Israel, unite against Israel and march to put a stop to all this.

But under Gideon's tentative leadership, Israel is showing some backbone. Just before the big battle, the scripture says, "But the spirit of the Lord took possession of Gideon, and he sounded the trumpet" (6:34). Despite Gideon's self, despite Gideon's fear, God's spirit gives him courage and Gideon sounds the rallying cry by blowing the ram's horn, the trumpet of the Lord. All Israel responds and sends volunteers to fight. So many show up that God says to Gideon, "You have too many volunteers. If you win, everyone will think it's because you're so big. Thin out your numbers. Get smaller. Then everyone will know you won the victory because of the Lord God."

A quick aside and a heads-up to Austin Heights: We're small enough that God wants to use us. Beware. You show up around here and who knows what God might call to us to next. If you wanted somewhere safe, perhaps a big church will do.

Gideon thins the Israelite army down from 32,000 to 300 and then God leads them to fight in God's unconventional way: they attack the Midianites in the middle of the night blowing trumpets and smashing clay jars that had lit torches inside. As a result, the Midianites flee in fear.

Gideon is a coward. He is controlled by fear. But by the power of God, this coward is converted into a leader with courage. And along with cowardly Gideon, there is cowardly Israel who eventually takes risks and bold action because of the assurance of God's presence.

Second quick example: More famous than Gideon is David and one of the all-time most famous biblical battles is David vs the Philistine “giant” Goliath (I Samuel 17:1-51). I Samuel 17 tells us that the Philistine army is lined up against Israel’s army and stepping out of the Philistine battleline comes their champion named Goliath. He was nearly ten feet tall and wore armor, that by itself weighed 126 pounds. In awe of him, the writer said his spear was like a tree-trunk and the tip weighed 15 pounds.

The response of Israel to this threat is not a surprise; they were afraid:

When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, there were terrified with fear and lost all hope (v. 11).

Enter David. Remember that David is a scrawny kid, a nobody, the eighth son among the children of Jesse. Again, now in the presence of young David, Goliath speaks “the same words as before” (v. 23). Again, Israel responds in fear:

And the Israelites, when they saw the man, fled from him and were very much afraid (v. 24).

David, “though he be little, he is fierce,” (to paraphrase Shakespeare), asks questions that demonstrate his trust in and commitment to the Lord God:

Who is this Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God (v. 16)?

David is clear. David is there and Israel is there because of “the living God”!

David remembers how God took care of him when he tended sheep, and his flock was attacked by a lion or a bear. He remembered defeating lions and bears because of God, and David says, “If the Living God protected me then, then surely the Living God will protect me now” (vv. 34-37).

King Saul is willing to give David a chance and offers to equip David with battle gear. David refuses such armaments. The Philistine mocks him. But David trusts in the “Lord of hosts.” He declares to the Philistine:

You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hand and I will strike you down... so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and all this assembly may know that the Lord does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord’s and he will give you into our hand (vv. 45-47).

David is well-formed in the Living God of Israel. His courage is rooted in God. In turn, scripture says:

So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone (v. 50).

These two stories have much in common. Both feature a fearful, helpless people. Both celebrate a man of courage who did not allow the fears of his people to control him. But the difference between the two narratives is also striking. Gideon had to be carefully nurtured out of his cowardice into courage. By contrast, David knew no cowardice from the beginning. He is from first to last filled with effective courage. We are not told why David has courage. We are told, however, in the previous chapter of David's anointing:

The spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward (I Samuel 16:13).

David's encouragement – the giving of courage – is much like Gideon's:

But the spirit of the Lord took possession of Gideon; and he sounded the trumpet (Judges 6:34).

In both instances it is the encouragement of the Lord God's spirit that results in brave, risky action. In the end, it does not matter to the narrators that Gideon had to be nurtured or that David was always at the ready. Both men act in courage. Both are mobilized by God's resolve. Both refuse the fear of their people. Both lead their people. Both make a decisive difference. Though both stories are full of cowardice, both stories and both people are remembered for their courage and their risk-taking that change the course of their history.

Gideon was a profile in cowardice, who was open to God's spirit and therefore, received courage to do great and mighty things. David too



was immersed in the power of the Living God, who used him dramatically. And Hebrews 11 holds them up, along with others, as our exemplars and encouragers (there's that word again).

But perhaps Hebrews takes for granted, though it is present throughout the Bible, the mundane, ordinary courage of showing up, being faithful, loving God, loving each other, and loving creation day after day, not giving up, not giving into despair, and sticking with it.

Both the classical virtues and the biblical gifts of the spirit are all considered to be aspects of a whole life lived. In other words, as an example, courage is best practiced along with prudence. Prudence, also known as good thinking, tells courage the difference of taking heroic action in contrast to being rash or foolhardy. Good thinking says things like, "Yes, this is the time for making a stand." Or "No, Kyle calm down, think about this." At the same time, good thinking without courage, might justify doing nothing. Courage tells prudence, "It's time to get out there." They work together.

Another example might be that courage is to be embodied along with constancy or perseverance. Most of the time, courage is demonstrated in dramatic moments – Gideon blowing the trumpet, David facing Goliath, Samson pulling down the temple upon the Philistines, and so on – but what about the daily, patient, and unheroic courage of training a child in the ways of the Lord – someone had to train and teach Gideon and David and Samson. What about the ordinary courage of staying faithful, day after day in marriage for 50 years? What about

caring even when you're tired or when you're at the end of your rope and you're asking, "What's the use?" but you keep on caring?

Back in the mid-1980's, when I was living in a communal household in Atlanta, GA, working among young, radical Christians who were working with the homeless, fighting racism, standing for justice and peace, and getting arrested, a common truism, was, "Everyone wants a revolution. No one wants to do the dishes."

It's not that some must do the dishes while others go fight the revolution. It's that doing dishes is part and parcel of God's revolution. God works through Gideon but also God works through Martha in the book of Luke, who is busy washing dishes, cooking, and doing the laundry.

Think of the long list of ordinary and overlooked people in the Bible, mostly women, like Martha and her sister Mary. Think of Jochabed, who was the mother of Moses, or the widow Jesus talks about who gave everything she had, two coins in her offering in the Temple, or Anna, who every day prayed in the Temple for 84 years waiting for the Messiah, or Phoebe, whom Paul says was a deacon in Romans 16 in a day when women were not considered leaders. Or Lydia, the successful businesswoman in Acts 16, who was the core leader and financial underwriter of the vibrant Philippian church.

So this morning be reminded that it takes courage to believe that a small life is still a meaningful life. It takes courage to trust that God is at work through small churches and small mundane actions, day after ordinary day.

Chapter 11 of Hebrews ends in an interesting way. All these heroes are “commended for their faith, but they did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made complete (vv. 39-40).

Somehow or another we’re all connected with those heroes listed in Hebrews 11. Our courage and faith are part of their courage and faith. Some of us and some of our elected leaders who are cowardly may step up and do the right thing, completing the work of such people as Gideon and David. But also the work of Lydia and Martha and Jochabed.

One of my favorite stories most of you know is about the general inspecting a unit of elite paratroopers. The general walks up to a tall, strong looking trooper and growls, “You like being a paratrooper?” The trooper yells back, “Sir, yes sir!” “Why is that soldier?!” “Because sir, I like jumping out of airplanes!”

The general goes to the next paratrooper, “You like jumping out of airplanes?!” and the trooper shouts back, “Sir, yes sir!”

Next, the general comes up to a little, scrawny trooper. “You like jumping out of airplanes?!” The small trooper says, “No sir! I hate it, sir!” “Then why are you in the paratroopers?” He answers, “Because I like being around other people who are not afraid of jumping out of airplanes, sir!”

Austin Heights – God calls us to be with one another and with Gideon and David, so we will be around people not afraid. So we learn to be courageous. But we're also with people like Martha and Lydia and Jochabed who were not afraid of doing dishes, teaching Sunday School, tithing, and caring for neighbors – from whom we're learning courage, as well.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.