

## **“Brave and Faithful Boldness”**

A sermon preached at Needham Congregational Church, UCC

Acts 4: 23-35

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Grace and peace be to you from Jesus Christ the head of the church. I bring you greetings, blessings and all manner of good wishes from the 70 churches of the Metropolitan Boston Association as well as the 360+ churches of the MA Conference.

I want to thank Rev. Heike and church leaders for the invitation to be here and preach. It is good to be together to worship God and lift up our covenant connections as the body of Christ. It is also good to be with you as you are in a time of transition in pastoral leadership. I will hold you in prayer in these days of change and trust the fruitfulness God has in store for you.

I celebrate who you are in the present and I am praying for your vibrant future. Before we move to the scripture text would you help me celebrate who you are in the present by thanking someone next to you for being part of this ministry? Reach out to someone and say “thanks for being part of this ministry!”

The topic for this sermon is “What would you do if you were brave?” In preparation to be with you today, I gathered some of your history from Rev. Heike and David Johnson. **You have a line of bravery in your DNA!** Back in 1857, after 137 years of living as First Parish then Orthodox Congregational Church in Needham, a cadre of members expressed their convictions of faith by separating to form what would be named Evangelical Congregational Church. And just one generation later they built a meeting place at this location with a vision to reach new populations with the good news of Jesus Christ. You survived the Unitarian controversy!

**You have a line of bravery in your DNA!** In 1924 after taking out a mortgage for repairs to the church building, a fire consumed the structure. Members of the church rebuilt, sustained the

ministry through the trying times of the Depression and expanded the edifice as the congregation and town grew in the 1950's.

**You have a line of bravery in your DNA!** In this current day and for almost 30 years you have been engaged in a cross cultural, cross national ministry partnership in Guatemala providing ministry and broader understanding of the world to participants. Over the years, partnership delegations have brought 250 people to the village of **Santa María Tzejá**, to live among, meet with, share meals, teach and learn from, mutually entertain, and grasp the struggles and the achievements of people whose indigenous culture draws substantial contrasts from your own. As a consequence of your partnership, over 500 youth have earned a 9<sup>th</sup> grade education, and several hundred have gone on to high school and even college.

When you take time to look at history a truth emerges - each generation shapes purpose and makes traditions of its own by carrying some practice of the past forward to the next while other traditions fall aside when new ideas emerge. Sometimes all one needs is a tweak to a tradition here and a tweak there, other times a complete overhaul is called for.

Author Phyllis Tickle has written about a historical overhaul that has happened in the Christian Church. Historians like her note that every 500 years the Xn church has a "rummage sale" and completely re-imagines itself.

Tickle names some hallmarks of this new thing that is emerging:

- Radically Jesus oriented – living the principles he taught and modelled
- Communal – 25% some form of monasticism
- Largely based in virtual reality as opposed to bricks and mortar – hello social media
- Post-denominational, post-protestant it looks back to 1<sup>st</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries to find the passionate practices that sustained the church in those trying times and weaves it into today.

Phyllis Tickle would say we are the "lucky ones" to be in another one of those 500 year rummage sales. That means we in this generation have some responsibility for what the Christian

faith looks like moving forward from today. Phyllis would also say that renewing the church is not so hard if we focus on what got us all started in the first place.

This story from Acts gives churches like Needham Congregational Church a lot of information for this time of transition and looking to a vibrant future. When we look at these disciples it is important to note two things:

1. It took a death to shake things up
2. They were freed up to be brave and take risks

We cannot read this story of life after Jesus' resurrection without recognizing that the Christian church was born out of death. That the disciples, who were huddled in a room, hunkered down waiting for the Spirit Jesus promised would come, and then emerged speaking boldly is no small matter. The one they were following was killed, executed by the occupying state and caused them to flee in fear, as well as betray and abandon their principles.

Once the first followers left that locked room, in the face of possible harm and even death they got down to business spreading good news and living in the light of God's amazing grace and plenty. They had everything they needed, and they were willing to share with others. The reading from Acts this week charts the basic course of their movement-making. It wasn't a program available for immediate download to your hard drive. It wasn't a prepackaged plan for only \$49.95. It was (and is) a life afire to tell the story of Jesus with boldness and to be "of one heart and soul" holding all things in common so that the needs of the people are met.

Jesus' simple guide for an abundant life in faithful community has been working well for more than two millennia. It's easy to contextualize, simple to follow, and provides proven results. When the principles practiced by the first century disciples are faithfully and fully implemented, the results are, well, abundant. You can tell when a congregation or worshiping community is working from this first century model; there's a real sense of common purpose, a generosity of spirit and resources, a desire to dig deeply into scripture and participate regularly in worship, intentional and ongoing faith formation, an open door and a hearty welcome, a spirit of mission and service – all of which are covered liberally with prayer and praise.

So if these principles are so fool-proof and sure, why aren't we seeing more growth in our communities? Why isn't the good news spreading like wildfire today in the United States and other western nations? It is in developing nations and where poverty is crippling, but why not among the affluent? Those are good questions, ones we should ask and ponder. Perhaps it has something to do with commitment and focus. Jesus demands 100 percent. He wants all of us – not just an hour a week or a place in the pew for festival worship, and not just a few dollars in an offering plate or service on a boring committee.

This is Good News we're talking about – life changing, world healing, saving news with eternal promises. It's not the latest fad or trend. It's real, and we have to be real about it <sup>1</sup>because lives are at stake still.

Let me tell you a story that illustrates how lives are still at stake in our world. In December of 2014, national staff from across the United Church of Christ were gathered in Savannah, Georgia for a bi-annual meeting. Our meeting coincided with the news of the non-indictment of New York City police officers involved in the death of Eric Garner. This was one week after the non-indictment of officers in Ferguson, MO and the killing, by police officers of 12 year old Tamir Rice in Cleveland. Clearly communities in our country and ones our churches serve were reeling at this news. And there we were United Church of Christ staff all gathered in one place.

What should we do? For those who wanted to figure out something in that moment a special lunch was arranged and a challenge was issued - What would you do if you were brave? We self-identified into one of three groups:

1. Those who would answer that question from their own front porch once we returned home.
2. Those who would answer that question on the ground in New York City, Ferguson or Cleveland
3. Those who were felling called to write – blogs, liturgy, sermons

In those groups, in a circle of 10-15 people we had a total of one minute to answer the question, with the last ten seconds counted out loud – what would you do if you were brave? That

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<sup>1</sup> Signs, Wonders & Movement-making. Lectionary reflection by Sharron R. Blezard, April 9, 2015

was one minute for those 10-15 people in that circle. There would be no committee meetings to decide, no organizing – just commitment called forth in that moment in response to events where lives are still at stake and people of faith need to be heard and seen.

What would you do if you were brave? And do you know, that even though that amounted to about 5 seconds per person to decide and state their brave response, every one of us made a commitment. I am still living into mine of enacting racial justice training for our MA Conference churches.

Friends, it may not be around issues of race that Needham Congregational Church is called to be brave, but I can guarantee you, that if you are committed to following Jesus- some bravery, some boldness, some courage will be called forth from you. This is the work that is ahead of you in this time of transition and it is not the work of “what do we need to do in order to keep on doing the things we have always done even though we may have forgotten why we are doing them.”

No, the work is to reconnect with the “why” of your existence and step into that “why” fully, boldly and bravely – not so that this building stands another 62 years but so that the transforming power of Jesus Christ can be seen and understood through the lives transformed by this gathered body of people. The work is to reconnect to the “why” of your existence so that people in Needham are overheard to say, “this is a great community to live in because of those good people at Needham Congregational Church.” The work is to reconnect to the “why” of your existence so that, to quote your covenant...” we live out our faith in the world by furthering justice and peace, witnessing to the truth, and proclaiming God’s love and mercy for all people.” May it be so!