

We had some friends over for pizza last Sunday evening. Several of us were seated on the back porch and one of the teenagers began talking about his experience with organized religion. He grew up in a Christian denomination which emphasized the practice of confirmation for its children. Around the age of twelve, the children take classes in the Christian faith, then stand before the congregation on a Sunday morning and answer a series of questions posed by the pastor. This customarily involves having the children memorize very specific answers to the questions, supplied to them by their teachers, so that all their answers are the same. It is a recitation, not a vigorous search for truth.

When the Sunday arrived for this boy to stand with the other children, he told his teacher he had doubts about some of the answers he was expected to provide. "Say them anyway," his teacher told him. "Just stand up there and say them."

The boy was uncomfortable saying he believed something when he didn't, but wasn't sure what to do. So he got in line, walked in the sanctuary with the other kids, and stood before the large congregation. The pastor began asking them questions, working his way down the row of children, each of whom gave the pre-ordained, memorized response. Push the button, the tape turns, out comes the answer.

The pastor came to the boy, asked him the same question, the boy paused, then said, “Well, I’ll tell you how I see it.” Then proceeded to tell the pastor and congregation what he believed. This was a first for the priest, who hesitated for a moment, was going to challenge the boy, apparently thought better of it, and went on to the next child. There were five or six questions, every other kid giving the same, pre-ordained, memorized response. Perfect little machines. Every time it was the boy’s turn, you could sense the pastor wanted to skip him, but couldn’t. And every time, this boy prefaced his remarks by saying, “Well, I’ll tell you how I see it.”

Now, remember back to when you were in the sixth grade, when you were twelve years old, and hated standing out, hated speaking in public, hated for anyone to think you were different, and you think of the courage it took for this boy to stand apart from the crowd and say, “Well, I’ll tell you how I see it.” I know adults who can’t do that. That took *courage*.

We’ve been talking the qualities of the spiritual life—gratitude, reflection, spiritual pacing or being present in the moment, mercy, humility, and curiosity. This morning I want to add *courage* to our list.

Courage is a trait our culture normally associates with physical bravery. But life doesn't often require physical bravery from us, so much as it requires emotional or spiritual bravery. This is the bravery that enables us, when everyone else around us expects our conformity and compliance, to stand straight, look others in the eye, smile, and say, "Well, I'll tell you how I see it." Emotional and spiritual bravery means not sacrificing one's conscience and integrity at the altar of public opinion.

Joan came home from school this week and was telling me about a little boy in one of her library groups who, because of his unkempt appearance, is not always treated kindly by the other children. He's starting to be ostracized. That process starts early in life. This week the little boy was upset because it was the week for parents to register their sons for Cub Scouts and his parents hadn't done that. He discovered this during library and began to cry. He'd wanted to build and race a pinewood derby car. When he started to cry, the other children began edging away from him and some of the children even began to tease him for crying. One of the other little boys, whose parents had remembered to sign him up for Cub Scouts, went to the boy, put his arm around him, and said, "Don't cry. I'll bring my pinewood derby car to school and you can play with it." When Joan told me that story, I thought how being kind when everyone else is unkind can be an act of dignity and courage.

The poet Maya Angelou, said this about courage. “One isn’t necessarily born with courage, but one is born with the potential for it. Without courage, we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We can’t be kind, true, merciful, generous, or honest.”

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Think about that.

Before Jesus was anything, he was courageous. A current of courage ran through everything he did.

When a crowd demanded the death of a woman caught in adultery, the moral courage of Jesus saved her life.

When religious zealots valued Sabbath conformity over compassion, the spiritual courage of Jesus made it possible for the crippled to be healed.

When others despised the stranger, the courage of Jesus allowed him to love the Samaritan and welcome the rejected.

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When I was pastoring in Irvington, I received a phone call one night from a young woman who lived on the near-east side of Indianapolis in a neighborhood known for its violence and crime.

It was late at night, almost midnight, the woman was very distraught and said she needed to speak to a minister. I didn't know her, but she said she had once been treated kindly by some Quakers, so was calling me. In the course of our telephone conversation, she mentioned another Quaker pastor by name, then asked if I could come be with her, and gave me her address. Before I left home, I phoned the other minister, who said he knew the woman, told me she had multiple personality disorder, and advised me to take the clerk of our meeting with me. I don't know who the clerk of his meeting was, but the clerk of our woman was a woman named Harriet who was in her mid-70's, slightly built, and stooped over.

I phoned Harriet, asked her to go with me, went by her house to pick her up, then we drove the four miles into the inner city and found the house, a run down place divided into apartments. We knocked on the door, and after awhile a disheveled young woman opened the door and motioned for us to enter. I had Harriet go in first, so I could protect her in the event we were attacked from behind. It quickly became clear the young woman was seriously mentally disturbed. She exhibited several different personalities, each of them radically different from the other, and some of them quite bizarre. It was very upsetting and I was nudging Harriet, trying to edge us closer to the door. I had only one personality, but it was a very frightened one.

The young woman began to sob and Harriet, instead of moving toward the door with me, crossed the room, went to the woman, and held her. The woman cried and cried and cried. Harriet said, "Honey, let's just sit here and be silent together." They sat on the couch and Harriet held her, as one would a child, and they were silent together. After about a half hour, the young woman was composed. She thanked Harriet and seemed quite normal. Of course, she still was not well, but for a brief time she was at peace.

Every now and then, I go see Harriet. She has Parkinson's Disease and is slipping away. But I sit with her and think of her courage and compassion that evening. You know, without courage, we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency.

I close with a query: Are we compassionate, as Jesus was compassionate, especially when the activity of kindness requires us to be brave?