

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer

July 15, 2007

www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org

The Many Forms of Fortitude

Romans 5: 1-5

She was a strange young woman, but no one could say she wasn't brave.

She left home at sixteen, without the knowledge of her parents, sure that she had clearly heard God commanding her to ride to a castle in France where resided a weak-willed, uncertain young man whom this young woman knew would be her country's next king. This weak-willed young man was actually warned of this young woman's approach and hid himself as a commoner amidst the royal court.

Even so, this young woman, though she had never seen him, walked among all the well-dressed courtiers and stopped before the prince to say, "That is the king."

The prince pointed to a noble-looking young man as the true king, but this rude peasant girl persisted, crying, "In God's name, noble prince it is you and none other." She told him that she had been sent by God to help him gain his kingdom and be an instrument of his anointing as the leader of his nation.

This strange girl had been hearing the voice of God since she was twelve, telling her that she was going to do something important. At age sixteen she heard the Spirit of God telling her that it was God's will that she rout the British at the city of Orleans. She informed the young prince Charles that this was her destiny.

Her surety was such that he gave her his support. As incredible as it might seem, this amazing young woman soon headed an army of Frenchmen, attacking a dozen well-fortified bastions that the British had built as part of their siege.

This young woman was wounded by an arrow, yet she refused to retire, pulling the arrow out of her chest with her own hands and crying out to her troops, "The day is yours! Enter!"

Who would not follow such a leader?

A siege that had not been lifted in six months was lifted in less than six days, and the entire course of the Hundred Years War was changed forever. Inspired by this intrepid young woman, Prince Charles soon rode to his crowning on July 17, 1429. The young woman continued to lead French forces in the capture of town after town, though she was severely wounded in the process.

Yet her purity of spirit was so powerful that politicians on all sides feared her.

When she was captured by the British in a battle, the prince she had helped make king refused to aid her.

Yet the British were cagey enough not to want the blood of this incredibly popular young woman on their hands, so they made a deal with crafty, sinister French politicians to turn her over

to unscrupulous church officials who tried her as a heretic. Their intent was to discredit her.

They tried to force her to recant her testimony that God had spoken to her; she would not.

They showed her vile instruments of torture that had made many a brave man say whatever was demanded.

This young woman declared, "I don't care if you tear me limb from limb, I would affirm all that I have said."

So they burned this young woman at the stake. But even as they did so,

the crowd who watched her execution cried out, "We are lost! We have burned a saint!"

Twenty-five years after her death, the same man she made king pardoned her, and eventually the Catholic church confessed that they had erred. So sorry. In 1920, they finally canonized her.

But she has always been known to history as St. Joan of Arc,

the girl whose courage changed the course of history.

I tell her story because she exemplifies what the early church regarded as fortitude, the ability to endure torture and torment even unto the end.

Indeed, originally, the Christian community defined fortitude in terms of martyrdom.

Yet, though it prized martyrdom, the early church said plainly: “We have no praise for those who offer themselves to martyrdom voluntarily. This is not the counsel of the Gospel.”

Church rules actually forbade Christians from voluntarily offering themselves for martyrdom.

Why? Because the church came to realize that the courage necessary to endure torture and persecution unto death was a gift given by God.

In the church’s experience, those who offered themselves for martyrdom voluntarily were almost sure to break under persecution, because they were depending not upon God’s will, but upon their own.

The early church recognized from the beginning that fortitude is a virtue granted solely by God.

Of course, most of us will not ever be called upon to exhibit that form of fortitude,

though I would hasten to add that there are many Christians around the world

who face all manner of persecution because of their faith.

But very few of us will be called upon to exhibit that form of fortitude that ends in martyrdom.

However, there are other forms of fortitude far more subtle, yet just as vital to our lives.

Listen to this description of his own “normal” household offered by moral theologian Albert Borgmann:

I come home late from work and pull something out of the frig, pop it in the microwave, then sit down in front of the tube to watch a few innings of baseball. My wife comes in late from a meeting and

we exchange a few words and then she goes to fix herself some supper, while I go to my computer to do a

memo. Our children are holed up in various parts of the house, studying, playing on their computers

or listening to music – or perhaps doing all three at once. Finally, everybody falls into bed, exhausted.

Then Borgmann analyzed his family’s behavior.

Nobody had stolen anything or killed anybody or coveted any of their neighbor’s possessions.

Nobody had inconvenienced anybody else.

But we also, he admitted, had failed to engage each other with any degree of depth.

No one had truly interacted with one another.

Each of us had eaten what they wanted, listened to and watched what they wanted,

But each of us had retreated into our own little autonomous cocoon.

No one had summoned the will to enter and encounter anybody else’s existence.

Though they are a family who claims to love each other, no one had truly interacted with one another.

Borgmann then observed:

“We may well live in a world where the physical thresholds are low and smooth, but they correspond with a world where the spiritual thresholds are high and hard, so high that very few people cross them.”

How many of us possess the fortitude to summon the will to break out of our little world and to break into somebody else’s? How many of us have the fortitude meaningfully to engage the lives of those around us?

How many of us summon the courage to cross thresholds of comfort to interact with somebody else, to break down walls?

This is a subtle but vital form of fortitude that each of us must practice.

Some forms of fortitude originate in a spiritual courage that becomes manifest in a moral and physical courage. I think of the testimony of a Trappist monk who was among seven monks kidnapped and beheaded by Islamic fundamentalists in Turkey about twenty years ago.

This monk in particular had been involved in a Christian-Islamic dialogue. Two years before his execution he had written a letter that was only to be opened in the case of his violent death.

In his letter he revealed that he knew his life was in peril.

He also knew that fortitude was not fearlessness but summoning the courage to persevere even in the face of one’s own fear.

Yet, he said, if I am killed by those opposed to my faith, I do not want there to be a knee-jerk reaction against Islam in general. He said, I believe the dialogue between the two faiths is necessary and must continue.

Then the monk addressed his killer directly: "Someday, perhaps two good thieves can meet in paradise and discuss matters in the presence of the God in whom we both believe."

That, my friends, is fortitude, fortitude rooted in a spiritual conviction that the values of God's Kingdom will ultimately triumph.

That monk's spiritual fortitude manifested itself in a moral courage and, ultimately, a great physical courage, for his willingness to die was rooted in his willingness to love.

His graciousness toward others was rooted in his trust in the graciousness of God.

His example underscores a crucial point about fortitude.

There is a reason why classical Christian theologians have listed prudence and justice prior to it.

Mere courage is not fortitude.

Courage is fortitude only when the source of the courage is good and the goal of the perseverance is worthy.

Endurance in behalf of some cause selfish and loathsome is boorish and vain.

For fortitude to be fortitude it must be shaped by prudence, justice, and charity.

For fortitude to be fortitude it must have a positive source and a positive purpose.

Ultimately, fortitude is service rendered to God's divine and eternal Kingdom.

But let us focus for a moment on a form of fortitude that is subtler than all the others, yet every bit as vital to our well-being.

I speak of the fortitude that gives you the simple courage necessary to endure everyday living while maintaining your belief in the ultimate triumph of God, a fortitude that allows you to maintain your power of hope and sustain your confidence in the eventual triumph of goodness and gives you strength to continue to pour yourself out in goodness' behalf.

I speak of the fortitude that gives you the power to give of the best of yourself, even as the circumstances of life conspire to quench your trust and your hope and your faith and your love.

The truth is, life beats us all up. Existence bruises us, injures us.

There is a dangerous aspect to all of existence.

There is a shadowside that hangs over all creation that we do not want to acknowledge.

You can say to a group of young people as they leave for a hike, keep your eyes and ears open, for you never know what might be out there.

It is not until one of them nearly steps on a rattlesnake that they begin to listen.

Then they begin to pay attention.

An aspect of danger and vulnerability pervades the whole of our lives.

Heartache is never far from us.

Loved ones die, friends age, relationships fray, cancers invade, accidents injure, betrayals scar, sicknesses debilitate.

Daily we bear burdens of grief, daily we carry crosses of pain, daily we agonize with loved ones in distress, daily we feel the challenge of paying the high price of love as we nurture those around us.

Daily we hold to hope even when we feel the tug of the vacuum of hopelessness.

Daily we try to cultivate a healthy spirit even as negativity assaults us in a thousand different ways.

It is not just the heroes and saints who must summon their courage in the face of negative circumstance, ordinary people must rise to that challenge and draw from the strength of fortitude every ordinary day.

Fortitude in this situation requires patient endurance, steadfast faith, unwavering love,

and an attitude of ceaseless expectation that our willingness to serve can and does make a difference.

It is hard to hold to faith when your heart is hurting, when your soul feels empty, when your life feels at loose ends, yet that is when the courage of trust in God and love for others is most necessary.

To maintain an unquenchable hope in the face of life's negativities requires a subtle but vital form of fortitude.

Perhaps what I am saying sounds too abstract, so let me make it concrete by means of an example.

The *Sports Illustrated* columnist Rick Reilly told the story not long ago about a skinny little gym rat who lives in a housing project with his disabled mother and who spends every free minute shooting baskets in the gym.

He made his high school jayvee team just because the coach appreciated his love for the game, and late in the season, in a few meaningless games, he put the kid in the game to make free throws. He never missed.

So the coach decides to add the kid to the varsity roster for the tournament season, never expecting to use him.

But in the city championship final, with the team up by three, late in the game one of their players is injured by a hard foul, the coach looks down the bench and says, "Sean, get in there!"

The unlikely figure of Sean Cronk comes off the bench.

He walks onto the court dragging his limp left leg, because he is afflicted with cerebral palsy, which is why this kid who lives in the gym and has a sweet shot never gets to play when it matters.

This time it matters.

As he limps on the court, half the crowd actually starts screaming at him, mocking him as a cripple.

He hears nothing; all he sees is the basket.

When he pulls the ball back over his head with both hands, shooting like little kids and old men do, the crowd's derision grows louder.

Then Sean Cronk's free throws go, *swish, swish*.

When the opposing team hits a desperation three-pointer, everyone realizes that Sean Cronk's free throws just won the city championship.

But Sean Cronk's moment of glory came only because this disabled kid kept shooting in that gym, hour after hour, day after day, year after year, until he hit more than a hundred thousand free throws, in the improbable hope that one day somebody would call upon his skill when it really mattered.

One day it really mattered.

That kind of hope, that kind of perseverance in the face of negativity, that kind of hope

in the face of improbability, that kind of willingness to keep doing what you are doing

in the belief that your efforts will one day accomplish something great,

that's the kind of fortitude we need to practice.

Maybe your life is calm and quiet right now.

Maybe you think you have no need to summon resources of spiritual courage.

Trust me, such peace is temporary. Anxiety, tension, heartache, grief, enervating sadness, fear – these negative realities will assault you tomorrow, if not today.

But our Lord does not leave us desolate. Our God gives us the power to rejoice in our sufferings, for we know that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint.

Why? Because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

I don't know what form of fortitude life might elicit from you this day.

But it is a virtue that only God can give us.

Let us open our lives to God's empowering presence and live by the courage granted by God's great Spirit.

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer

July 15, 2007

Fifth in the Series