



Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush
Text: I Peter 3:8-15

January 19, 2025

On Having Moral Courage

I will never be a mega-church pastor for lots of reasons. I can't give a sermon walking around; I don't look good in skinny jeans; I don't have enough hair. But mostly I'll never be a mega-church pastor because sometimes you need to give an uncomfortable sermon. And preachers in huge auditoriums with surround-sound speakers and theatrical lighting don't give uncomfortable sermons. For them, faith – and sermons about faith – are like those moving walkways in airports. These sermons get you from Point A to Point B in comfort and ease – with no real exertion required of the listener, maybe a funny anecdote to entertain them along the journey and a soft, uplifting landing at the end. Uncomfortable sermons that require something of the listener rarely fill stadiums. They are like the people who walk alongside the moving walkways in airports – those people rolling a suitcase and lugging a heavy carry-on bag over their shoulders. People who walk alongside the walkways have to avoid oncoming pedestrians – other people who are racing to get to their gates, who are distracted while pushing baby strollers or dragging oversized suitcases of their own. Yes, it's more work to go alongside the walkways, to deal with messy humanity as you dodge and weave and realize how far you still have to go to get to your gate. But sometimes that's where you find yourself. Life isn't always easy or smooth or comfortable. And sometimes sermons about that are what you need to hear.

We don't know who wrote the letter we call First Peter. It is ascribed to Simon Peter, the beloved disciple of Christ, but given the excellent Greek it uses and the difficult church situation it describes, it was likely composed years after the death of Peter. The letter names its recipients as church members living in the Asia Minor region between the Mediterranean and Black Seas. More importantly, it notes that these Christians were struggling, facing persecution from both their neighbors and a hostile Roman government led by Emperor Domitian. The letter of First Peter offers them words of moral encouragement. As we heard in vs. 7, they're told "not to repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse." Instead they are to seek peace and pursue it after the example of Christ. And in vs. 14, it says "even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed...so do not be intimidated." Suffering for doing what is right - that is not a message designed to fill church pews or mega-church auditoriums.

It needs to be said that professing the Christian faith and seeking to do what is right and moral isn't easy. This was true in the days of the early church; it remains true today. Sometimes it's hard to fathom why doing the right thing is so difficult. There are moral rules that pretty much everyone can agree upon: It is wrong to torture or kill innocent

people. Children should be protected. Promises should be kept. Telling the truth is good; telling lies is bad. As people of faith, we are guided morally by what is written in the Ten Commandments and in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. So doing what is right should be like stepping onto that airport moving walkway – everyone basically in agreement, all on the same path, moving forward together. But instead, being a person of moral courage can feel like you're trudging alongside the moving walkway – dodging people walking toward you, dealing with others pulling their own heavy luggage, blocking your path forward, and insisting on their own answers to life's moral problems.

As people of faith, we need to recognize that doing the right thing is rarely the easy option or the universally accepted choice. That's just the uncomfortable truth about life in this world. And it is here that the example of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is so helpful. Dr. King advocated for nonviolent resistance, but others thought his approach was weak and destined to fail. Dr. King tried to make America live up to its democratic values and end the sinful practice of racial segregation; for that he was branded as a communist and put under FBI surveillance by J. Edgar Hoover. King tried to care for his wife and family, only to receive late night phone calls full of racist language and death threats about bombing his home. King spoke up for peace and challenged the senselessness of the Vietnam War, only to provoke the wrath of President Johnson. This Civil Rights leader whom we honor with a national holiday, according to a Harris poll from back in 1968 the year he was assassinated, had a nearly 75% disapproval rating from the American public.

Doing what is right almost always means pushing back on those who would have you do what is wrong. In April 1963, Dr. King was crammed into a Birmingham, Alabama motel room with over 20 of his advisors, trying to decide whether he should join a march scheduled for the next day. The major newspapers already denounced the planners of this march, calling King an "outside agitator" meddling in local politics just as the city was about to elect a slightly more progressive mayor. King was also the subject of a court injunction issued the prior day, so marching would mean defying state law for the first time. His legal advisers warned King that they were out of bail money, so if he was arrested, neither he nor his followers would get out until more funds could be raised.

On top of all those negative reasons, there were King's personal worries, such as the fact that his wife, Coretta, had just given birth to their fourth child one week earlier; or that his own father was in that motel room urging King not to defy the court order. King had already been arrested a dozen times before. He knew how vulnerable he was to mistreatment by jailers once he was away from the public eye and locked up behind bars. There were so many reasons why King shouldn't lead the march that next day.

King himself would later describe the scene this way: "I felt alone in that crowded room. [Eventually] I walked to the back of the motel suite. I thought of the 24 people waiting in the next room; I thought of the 300 waiting in prison. Then my mind leapt beyond the Gaston Motel, past the city jail, the state lines, and I thought of 20 million black people

who dreamed that someday they might be able to cross the Red Sea of injustice and find their way to the promised land of integration and freedom. There was no more room for doubt. I got into work clothes and went back to the other room to tell them I had decided to go to jail. I didn't know what will happen. But I had to make a faith act."¹

King did march, and within minutes, he and those with him were arrested. King was put in solitary confinement, a cell with a metal cot, no mattress, pillow or blanket. In that setting, he began to write down his thoughts on scraps of paper – words that eventually became the Letter from Birmingham Jail. Outside the walls, Bull Connor turned fire hoses and police dogs loose onto peaceful marchers, this time including children and students. But King's words from the Birmingham jail and the horrific sights from that city reported on the evening news managed to turn the tide for desegregation. In the face of tremendous opposition, King chose to act for justice, to show moral courage, to be a faith witness in a troubled time.

To the young church in Asia Minor – a church persecuted by the government and enduring hard times – faith leaders wrote to them and said, "Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated." Now some may question the wisdom of that advice. We are often taught that fear is a signal that we need to pull back and withdraw, but in truth fear is a sign that we have withdrawn too much. That is why the next verse in this passage is so powerful. Verse 15 says, "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you."

The uncomfortable part of this sermon is the reminder that choosing to do what is right often involves facing those who would insist you're doing wrong. In those moments, white privilege won't protect you. Your zip code or financial portfolio won't make everything smooth. Legal arguments and impassioned pleas from those you care about may try to dissuade you from taking the steps that need to be taken. The reality is that moral truth is not something everyone agrees upon. But in those hard moments, all you can do is quiet yourself down and listen to what's in your heart – as scripture says, "the hope that is in you." Then you build on that, making your defense to anyone who asks why you want to take the hard road for justice, why you are traveling the messy road for change, the difficult road for racial equality. At that moment, hopefully you'll hear the rest of what I Peter says: *Don't fear what they fear. Don't repay evil for evil. Have love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind.*

I can't promise you that you'll always be successful. Our best efforts may not work; they may not resolve every argument or heal every division. But there is a hope that is real that propels us forward into the struggle for victories over evil needed right now in our world, in our nation, and in our individual lives. Guided by this hope, we have the moral courage to contend against all opposition for the sake of the new world and new humanity promised by God in Christ that is at the heart of our faith.

You heard a bit of Dr. King's sermon "The Drum Major Instinct" in which he reflected on the request of James and John to be seated on Jesus' right side in power and glory. Here are King's final words from that sermon: *Yes, Jesus, I want to be on your right side or on your left side, not for any selfish reason or for some political ambition. I just want to be there in love and in justice and in truth and in commitment to others, so that we can make of this old world a new world.* May it be so. Amen.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., Why We Can't Wait, pp. 72-73.