

Practicing Courageous Faith  
I Timothy 1:1-14  
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Lin Grace Rohr

The musical *Wicked* has moved to Madison's Overture Center and many have caught the contagious energy of it. How many of you have seen it, here or elsewhere? If you haven't, it's the telling of what happened in the fictional Land of Oz before Dorothy and the Wizard of Oz story. There is a stanza from the musical that kept coming to mind when I was preparing this sermon. Let me first set the scene. The Ozians are laying out their complaints against Elphaba...the witch. Their attacks are gaining public support and that is clear in the title of the song: March of the Witch Hunters. The stanza is this:

And the lion also  
Has a grievance to repay  
If she'd let him fight his own battles  
When he was young  
He wouldn't be a coward today!

"Wouldn't be a coward today"...here in this fictional setting, we have an example of a reality, that if we practice something or not, it makes us who we are. If the lion practiced courage, he wouldn't be a coward. The author of I Timothy addresses this reality in a faith context using the same characteristic. Verse 7 says: "...for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline."

This passionate pastoral letter whose authorship is contested but given credit directly or indirectly to Paul, addresses Timothy, a young leader in the early church. Timothy's story is one of those that we in mainline denominations embrace as a witness of faithfulness. Unlike Paul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, Timothy's conversion to the Christian faith was through his grandmother's and mother's influence from the time he was a boy. We all are aware that there are some who believe we can't be Christian unless we have a dramatic conversion experience like Paul, knowing the day and time when we were born again; one of Timothy's witness to us is that God works within each of our lives differently...some with drama and others with consistent nurturing. From his grandmother, to his mother, and now to his mentor, Timothy is being nurtured in the faith.

When the letter was written, Timothy is discouraged so the nurturing message from his mentor in the verses we read this morning is to rekindle the gift of God; that is, faith that is within him, to not be ashamed of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus, and to endure the suffering for he (that is Timothy) knows the One in whom he trusts, God. The discouraged disciple, of course knows this, but like all of us, needed the reminder that faith is a journey. Frederick Buechner describes it well: "Faith is better understood as a verb than as a noun, as a process than as a possession. It is on-again--off-again rather than once -and-for-all. Faith is not being sure where you're going but going anyway. A journey without maps."<sup>1</sup> A journey without maps; a journey that takes courage. Courage learned through practice, experiences in faith over the years.

In order to look at a courageous faith we have to look first at what is courage. We jumped to the word “courage” as a natural response to the word “cowardice” used in verse 7. “...for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice.” It is interesting to note that the Greek word for cowardice here has also been translated as “a spirit of timidity” and as “a spirit of fear.” This letter could be written just for us today!

Today, fear is prevalent and like the fictional story of *Wicked* we see fear used in very real, serious contexts ~ sometimes even in public attacks. In our current contentious political environment, fear is being invoked by all sides... “if they have the power...these bad things will happen.” “If they get the power back, these bad things will happen.” Fear is also being used to motivate in caring for our planet. “If we don’t stop doing this...this will happen.” “If we don’t start doing this...this will happen.” Fear is being invoked to inspire commitment to education. “If we don’t change the way we educate our children we will fall farther behind the rest of world’s children.” As it is now, we are 24<sup>th</sup> in math, 17<sup>th</sup> in science and 10<sup>th</sup> in literacy according the NBC special on “Education Nation” that aired this week. Fear is also being used to widen the divides between different faith traditions. “What will happen if an Islamic cultural center is built near ground zero in NYC?” “What will happen if it isn’t built?” Fear overwhelms us when it comes to addressing the needs of hunger, poverty, healthcare, homelessness. Fear rises within us as we face our own personal challenges. I could go on but I think you see my point! The more important point is in the verse, “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, timidity or fear, but rather a spirit of power, and love, and self-discipline.”

The spirit of power is a spirit that courageously takes one small step on the journey of faith to practice addressing any one of the above, as well as, the courage it takes not to be discouraged or ashamed that we are followers of Christ seeking to live his way in the world. For example, the way of peacemaker, as we receive the peacemaking offering we take such a step; practicing, contributing, working, witnessing to our unity in Jesus Christ as Christian churches.

“God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, timidity or fear but rather a spirit of love...” another courageous step on the journey of faith is to practice living the love we’ve been given. In every aspect of our lives to take the risk of loving God first and loving others as ourselves! A theologian from Princeton, Dan Migliore,<sup>0</sup> summarizes it well: “The power to love comes from beyond ourselves, and the practice of love, like the practice of every Christian virtue, requires a lifetime of training.”

A lifetime of training...this brings us to the third part of verse 7. “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, timidity or fear but rather a spirit of self-discipline.” It takes self-discipline to practice courage. We don’t just become courageous people; it’s a journey in our faith. Like the lion in *Wicked*, who didn’t initially practice courage, but we know from the way the story unfolds was actually courageous once he began to tame his timidity and face his fears. Although the lion is fictional, it speaks to the truth of what the author of I Timothy was saying and what Migliore was saying, as we practice our love and our courage, our faith becomes the “verb” that Buechner was talking about...so that we can take action to continue the journey taming our own timidity and facing our own fears about a political life, or caring for our planet, or making a difference in the education of our children or building bridges to close the abyss between faith traditions or our own personal life challenges.

The power to practice courageous faith comes from beyond ourselves, and so like Timothy's mentor we are to encourage one another to rekindle our faith, this gift of God that is within us, to not be ashamed of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus, and to endure the things we suffer while on the journey for we know the One in whom we trust is God! Our journey may not have a map, and we certainly don't have a yellow brick road; but, we know we don't journey alone, we have each other and most importantly, God, the one in whom we trust, is with us!

1. Buechner, Frederick, *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith*, (Harper Collins, 2004) 109
2. Migliore, Daniel, *The Power of God and the gods of Power*, (Westminster, John Knox 2008)