

Homily: "The Cowardly Lion and Other Heroes"
November 11, 2007

Rev. Martha Hodges

*(Follows reading and song from **The Wonderful Wizard of Oz** by L. Frank Baum)*

Is the Cowardly Lion your favorite character in the Wizard of Oz? Mine, too. Maybe because he's so easy to relate to. Don't we all know what it feels like to be afraid, and to be ashamed of our fear? To reflect on our failure to act, or to speak, and to be mortified. We think about the firefighter running toward the falling tower when everyone else is running away. About the Dutch woman hiding the Jewish family in the attic. About the soldier refusing the order to fire on civilians. And we wonder... **Would we? Could we?**

Most of us never have to find out if we are capable of those kinds of death-defying acts of heroism. Most of us have enough trouble summoning the nerve to perform acts of ordinary courage. To speak up when the person we thought we knew makes a racist or homophobic joke. To intervene when we witness an out-of-control parent screaming at her sobbing toddler. To be tender and patient with our parent with dementia or a disabled child. To confront our friend bent on self-destruction. To face the newly bereaved when we don't know what to say. To admit a failure, to ask for forgiveness. These are acts of ordinary courage, ordinary heroism. Sometimes, to get out of bed in the morning is such an act. In the face of grief, or illness – our own or a loved one's --, in the face of chronic pain, or chronic loneliness, or abuse, just to keep going, just to live, can be heroic.

To be heroic when we have no choice, when there is nothing to lose, is one thing. To act instinctively, reflexively, like the parent who runs into traffic to snatch a child from the path of a car -- to be that kind of hero is another. But to consider the alternatives and the risks, and to act in spite of our fears – that's still another matter. To deliberately choose the more dangerous path, the more costly path, and, putting one foot in front of the other, march, or stumble or sidle toward our destination – toward our vision of wholeness, of dignity, of integrity – that takes another kind of courage.

That kind of bravery requires us to master our fear. To overcome our natural instinct to protect ourselves from danger. Because fear is not a bad thing. Fear is a blessing. There must have been an evolutionary advantage to experiencing fear. It's a warning. Those who perceive danger and run the other way are those most likely to survive. At least in situations demanding physical courage. Our instinct tells us to run away from the bear in our path, away from the explosion, not into it, and that's a good thing. Walking alone down a dark alley takes bravery, but it is also foolish. The same could be said for mountain climbing or sky diving, but, as a species, we seem drawn to this kind of risk-taking – at least some of us are. Maybe it's the adrenaline rush, as some suggest. Maybe it's the antidote to our species' foreknowledge of death and to deliberately challenge death and survive is to reduce our inherent anxiety about being mortal and vulnerable.

Most of us don't engage in extreme sports, though, or have careers that require us to defy death. We can listen when our bodies tell us to run.

Sometimes, though, the pounding heart and the sweaty palms tell us to run from the fire, but there is no fire. Sometimes, the "fire" is a threat to our integrity or our sense of self. Sometimes the bear in the road our bodies tell us to flee is a group of our peers waiting to judge us. For fear of failure and humiliation, I'm convinced, is often just as powerful as fear of falling – the fear of death. You're probably familiar with the poll that showed more Americans are afraid to speak in public than they are of dying. I know something of that particular fear, by the way. As I may have told you, I managed to get through four years of college and a couple of graduate degrees barely opening my mouth in class.

Then there's the fear of disapproval, of ostracism, of being singled out as different. This is the fear that keeps us tongue-tied when our office-mates make a cruel remark about someone unable to defend himself. Being part of the group is much safer.

Worry is another kind of fear that may not serve us well. We rehearse disaster when there is nothing we can do to avoid it. We fear going to the doctor about the lump in the breast; we fear the job interview and imagine all the things that can go wrong and get ourselves so terrified that we actually ensure that they will go wrong.

There's the fear of punishment, which may or may not serve us, and the fear of our own consciences – a much more powerful fear, and a healthy one.

The fear of loss, on the other hand, often keeps us from taking the risks that make our lives worth living. Love is such a risk. To love is to risk loss. Every bond of love will end in loss – if not our own that our loved one's. Love takes courage.

I said earlier that some fears are stronger than the fear of death. If this were not so, there would be no suicide. A profound sense of powerlessness is a factor in suicide and may be the greatest fear of all. The fear of helplessness, vulnerability, loss of control. Maybe these are what all those other fears boil down to in the end. Loss, humiliation, ostracism, shame – even pain and death – what these fears have in common is the reminder of our powerlessness, our vulnerability and lack of control over life.

Is there an antidote to this fear? A source of strength that we can turn to, like the vial of courage that the wizard gave our Cowardly Lion to drink? Of course, the magic potion in the story was not magic at all, unless it is magic to be able to find the source of our courage already within us, there all the time, unbeknownst to us.

Because, of course, courage cannot be bought or borrowed; it can only be discovered. It's good to have friends who help us to find this source within ourselves. Friends who literally en-courage us. Life is too hard to go it alone. This is the purpose of families, of communities, the purpose of churches.

And it's good to have a vision. An ideal of who and how we want to be, an example to follow. It's good to have role models and ideals. Family, friends, communities and churches. Courage can be learned.

And it's good to have a refuge. We cannot all be brave all the time. Our refuge may be faith in a loving god or a dependable universe. It may be music or nature. It may be a partner or a friend in whom we find the sustaining power of love. It may be a community such as this one that is here to catch us when we fall, here to catch us when we fail.

And, finally, it's good to have a purpose. One that carries us through our fear. One that allows us to forget ourselves, our aloneness and our self-doubts. A purpose allows us to put ourselves in perspective. We are not all-powerful, but neither are we helpless. We do have choices – most of the time – even when it feels like we do not. A purpose guides these choices and inspires us to keep going on those days when just to get out of bed takes courage. It's good to have a purpose that gives our life meaning, and, when we do not, it's good to have a community that helps us to discover one. A family that needs us, that gives us the strength to run toward the bear in the road and club it over the head, and maybe discover that it is only a stump. Friends that need us and our courage as we seek the Emerald City. A community that needs us – a community like this one.

May we all be so blessed.