

“The Miracle of Faithful Living”  
Stewardship-theme (Live Courageously)  
By Rev. James C. Ramsey

Texts: Jeremiah 29:11-13  
Luke 12:13-21

Preached: 11/18/18

Maya Angelou, the late poet, writer and civil rights activist knew about courage.

*(( Courage: the most important of all the virtues because without courage, you can't practice any of the other virtues consistently. ))*

It takes courage to follow Jesus and live a faithful life. It takes courage to faithfully manage all God has entrusted to us...our resources, our gifts and talents, all of our life.

Courageous people have an inner strength which helps them persevere, even in the most challenging times, even when confronted with danger, fear, or some other kind of difficulty. Whatever the hazards or calamity they face, courageous souls have developed a kind of fortitude and will that keeps them moving forward, bringing others out safely alongside them.

When you have courage to live for God, you begin to learn “The Miracle of Faithful Living”

We have been talking these last several weeks about what it means to live courageously. We were inspired, first, by those who have gone before us, that Great Cloud of Witnesses who paved the way for us, who remain our mentors and our cheerleaders, the ones who make up the Communion of Saints. We said that to live courageously, as the Saints who are our ancestors in the faith did, was the original Cloud Computing.

Then, last week, we paused to be inspired by the veterans among us. We honored them briefly. We saw pictures of them in their uniforms and heard their faithful reflections. If you are like me, you still marvel at their willingness to sacrifice for others, for their country...for us. They didn't expect to get rich by their service...and they certainly didn't get rich, at least not by the world's standards.

The Apostle Paul explained how to be the right kind of rich: *to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.*”

This week, I conclude our series as we anticipate Thanksgiving. This is a season to give thanks to God for all of our blessings. It's a time to take stock of what we have been given and celebrate life with family and friends. Some people invite neighbors over to their house. Some people focus on family, especially relatives who have traveled to be together. Some these days are holding a “Friendsgiving” get-together. My son, Ben, did that last week with some Freshmen colleagues who have become good friends. Each of them brought a different dish, a modern pot-luck, if you will, and met in one of their dorm's common rooms.

We imagine the very first Thanksgiving very much like a Friendsgiving. The English Pilgrims on the one side and the indigenous Massasoit people on the other. They spoke different languages, saw the world very differently, looked different, dressed very differently...but they were able to come together because of courageous people on both sides, people who were able to put away their initial fear of the other, who were willing to reach out, who were willing to share, to be generous, to help.

It could not have been possible without the brave gesture of one **Samoset**, the first indigenous Native

American to make direct contact with the Mayflower Pilgrims. On March 16, 1621, the settlers were more than surprised when Samoset strolled straight through the middle of the encampment at Plymouth Colony and greeted them in English. It turns out Samoset had begun to learn the Pilgrim's own language from English fishermen frequenting the waters around what is now the coast and island of Maine. Samoset came offering friendship, and the Pilgrims gave him lodging that first night and a meal. He returned to his people the next morning. Both sides promised to meet again. One of those future meetings would be what we now call Thanksgiving!

To live courageously means we recognize ourselves as God's own people, despite our vulnerabilities and apprehensions, despite our weaknesses and frightening circumstances. Such courage prompts us to live faithfully and free, free from the love-of-money trap, free to be "rich toward God." As we gain more understanding, as we mature in our faith, we learn to live simply, cultivating contentment, whatever our context. We delight in being generous: personally, in our families and together as a congregation.

Sometimes we forget our place, lose track of God's grace, and harden our hearts. Yet the miracle of faithful living is that faithful friends and neighbors are always there to pull us out of our funk...sometimes with a word, more often by some generous example.

A husband and wife were getting ready to go to a memorial service for the son of friends of theirs. The man had been killed while serving in the military. His family was dedicating a window in their church in the name of their beloved son, who had given the ultimate sacrifice. The window cost \$50,000.

"What a beautiful thing to do in honor of their son," the wife said to her husband. Suddenly, she turned around with an ashen look on her face and said very seriously, "What are we going to give?"

"What are you talking about?" he said. "We don't need to give anything. Our son came back alive and safe."

"That's exactly what I mean," she pressed. "Our friends lost their son, and they are giving \$50,000. We got our son back, and we are not giving anything?"

The Miracle of Faithful Living is that as we give we become richer – the right kind of rich.

FAITHFUL LIVING is simply our courageous attempt, having experienced the generosity and hospitality of the God we know in Jesus, to live a life that reflects that generosity, the life that really is life, as Paul says to Timothy.

The words *courage* and *courageous* appear only a few times in the New Testament. But in the Old Testament, we find some variation of "BE STRONG AND OF GOOD COURAGE," twelve times, like in the Book of Joshua, when God seeks to encourage the young leader Joshua, who is slated to fill the shoes of Moses.

What does it mean for us, today, at this juncture, here at East Union, to be strong and of good courage? What would it look like for us to take hold of the life that really is life? Have you experienced the miracle of faithful living? Have you glimpsed it, delighted in it?

Seems to me there is a good spirit here at East Union...would you agree? There's an energy and a vitality, an appetite to know God and serve God. This selfie was taken yesterday morning, by the way. These are, of course, three of our Deacons, Valerie, Shari and Jeanne – they were to the church yesterday by 7am, and they were joined by a whole cadre of other helpers, packing boxes for our

Thanksgiving Basket project.

Besides distributing all the fixins for an entire Thanksgiving feast to dozens of families, the group also unpacked all of the Christmas decorations for the whole church. And while the Deacons were so busy – the Trustees, and their helpers, were involved in a project of their own, painting the Youth Lounge in our Sunday School hallway! I can tell you, it made the pastor proud!

Do you know that I have been your pastor for 14...almost 15 years now? And I am still amazed by you, by your quiet faith, by your remarkable work ethic, by your tireless dedication, by your amazing patience and resilience, by your heart of hospitality and care, mission and fellowship.

Such a ministry as you all have built, and those who came before you – it's the envy of many a pastor. I don't take that for granted. I am humbled by it – Pastor Jo and I both are.

We have done a lot of great things here at East Union. But I don't want us to become complacent, to just keep on keeping on, to rest on our laurels.

I want to encourage you again to invest in God's work here at East Union, what God is doing now, and what God plans for us in the future. I want to invite us to think forward, to dream and then to back that up by pushing ourselves to take some risks in our future plans...trusting, of course, that God has good plans for us, plans for welfare, and not for evil, to give us a future with hope!

I'm going to dare to share with you some of the things your leaders have been discussing, Future Building/Capital Projects, to start. Here are three projects I think we need to move on...sooner, rather than later. We've talked about these things, and frankly, I'm tired of just talking about them. Each one of these projects would enhance our ministry for the future:

1. Solving the handicap accessibility issue between our sanctuary and Kennedy Hall/Sunday School wing. We've talked about various ramps, covered and uncovered...but what we really need is an elevator. I know elevators aren't cheap, but modern buildings with multiple floors have elevators.
2. Expanding the EUCC to accommodate a stage where our Praise Band has integrated hookups and can leave their equipment set-up and ready to go. This stage could have lighting for our worship, but could be used for any number of shows or pageants.
3. New electronic sign by the road that can be changed remotely from the office.

I don't know how we can do all these projects sooner, rather than later. I don't know how we can afford all of them. But I believe we have to be creative, and we have to be bold. We can't let (say) five more years go by and still be saying, "Gee, we really do need an elevator." OR "Golly, I wish we had a more professional situation for our Praise Band, like a stage or something!" And I hope we are not saying in five years, "Well, we've needed a new sign for a long time, but they're so expensive." I hope we're not saying that.

The Miracle of Faithful Living is that when we identify a need, even though there is no clear way that we can meet it, somehow, by the grace of God and the courage of God's people...well, things get accomplished beyond what we thought feasible!

As long as we are dreaming...and entertaining the possibility of miracles...I don't think just enhancing our campus is enough. We have to think more and more "outside the box" as pertains to our program,

as well.

These things might not be as costly, in terms of cold, hard cash, as the aforementioned building projects, but we'll still need courage to pull them off.

1. Youth Mission Trip – Summer of 2019. I see no reason why this can't happen. We haven't sent our youth on a significant mission trip in years now. It's time we did, again.
2. One-Time Mission Opportunities like a weekend Habitat build to accommodate busy adults. I think we need some fresh opportunities for our people to get involved in mission, where you could help one time without committing to a long-term project. There are other options besides Habitat, but Habitat is a good one.
3. Commercial/Business ventures that would generate outside revenue for our ministry. I don't know exactly what this might be – but we can think more about this – some non-profit venture that would make us money that would help finance our ministry...maybe an internet business of some sort, perhaps another kind of business. Any business venture is a risk, would require an outlay of resources up-front. We would have to weigh the cost/benefit ration, of course. Our Revenue Advisory Team has already been talking about this.

I challenge us to do all of these things – at least to consider them, try them or projects like them. It would be an investment in the future...God's good future. We dare not store up treasures for ourselves – as Jesus said to the crowd. Rather, how can we be rich toward God?

Jesus continues in The Gospel of Luke after our reading this:

*“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. <sup>23</sup>For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing...*

*...strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. <sup>32</sup>“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom...*

*<sup>34</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*