

## Talk given at the Chaplaincy Forum on Religion and Moral Courage

Goddard Chapel March 14, 2012

To act morally is to choose life. And sometimes, that takes courage.

My focus tonight is on the dailyness and ordinariness of moral courage.

I suspect that everyone here has shown moral courage throughout the day today. Getting out of bed for some is an act of moral courage. Interacting with others in a civil way sometimes takes courage...and patience. Engaging in learning can be a courageous act. And, at the end of the day, looking in the mirror and being honest and open with one's self can be an act of moral courage.

Morality. We all have to define morality for ourselves. But we don't do it in a vacuum, we do it in community and the more diverse our community, the deeper our concept of morality will be.

Charles Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, had a very basic definition of morality: do no harm, do good, and love God. Morality not only addresses the what, such as doing good, but also the way we do it, do no harm. For morality lies in the means as well as in the end.

There are times when, in retrospect, we can agree, or most of us can, on times when what was moral was clear, in both purpose and process. The Civil Rights Movement was such a time.

I celebrate the life of a dear clergy friend of mine who joined the freedom ride buses headed south to help African Americans register to vote during the Civil Rights Movement. That action took great moral courage because it was a dangerous thing to do. His wife stayed home with their five children, supporting him and enabling his going.

It wasn't until years later that I realized that she also showed great moral courage in ways that we didn't really didn't understand at the time. "They also serve who only sit and wait." ( Today, she might have gone while her husband stayed home to parent.)

There was also moral clarity for many about the Women's Movement as it identified and challenged sexism, heterosexism, and patriarchy. That Movement called for moral courage in little things as well as big things in the lives of both women and men and brings me closer to speaking about moral courage in everyday life. It was about women's access to positions of power and about partners sharing housework and parenting together. It was about equal pay for equal work and the simple use of inclusive language in daily speech. The daily things matter. Those little things add up and, ultimately, call for a change in world view.

Before I say anything more, I want to make clear the fact that I don't think morality comes easily for anyone. I think we have to work at it.

Watching my grandchildren grow up was wonderful and revealing. Since I didn't have to take care of them 24/7, I was able to notice things I never noticed with my own children. One of the things I

observed was the transition each of them made as they fell from a state of innocence to what shall I call it, the ability to sin? You might say, they each eventually took a bite of that fabled apple in the story of Eve and Adam.

In the beginning, when they were innocent, you could always count on them to tell the truth without filtering it. Then one day, they discovered that there might be some advantages to manipulating the truth. Do you know who broke this lamp or ate those cookies or hit his sister? No. And it got more complicated. Rationalization crept in. I hit my brother because he threatened me.

Don't get me wrong. My grandchildren are great human beings. It's just that they are normal. No one stays innocent forever. Learning to do the things that are life-giving and be authentic is a life-long process. If we are fortunate, we have those who stand by us as we develop ethically. Once innocence is gone, taking the moral high road gets more complicated; sometimes requiring an act of courage or of moral restraint.

Archbishop Tutu began his speech right here in this Chapel, years ago, with these words, "You are all good people." I was so taken back that I can still hear him saying that. There is something noble in human nature that resides in us along with our fall from innocence. That reminder in itself can give us courage.

Living up to the concept that we are all good people is a challenge as Tutu knows. He has seen the best and worst in human nature in South Africa and around the globe.

Throughout our lives, the best in us can emerge as we grapple with moral choices in each new personal and social situation and with each new life stage. On a daily basis as well as on a grand scale.

For Reinhold Niebuhr, the great theologian and social activist, who wrote the serenity prayer, one of his life's greatest challenges came when he had a stroke and had to accept the things he could not change, which included fighting depression. As it turned out, that took more moral courage than changing the things he could change which he had the courage and insight to adopt throughout his life.

As I close, I want to share two guiding principles that help me in my search for morality. Principles I fall short of daily. The first is to believe in the power of love over the love of power. Complex, mindful, willful, compassionate love. The second is like it, and seems to accompany the love of power: be wary of all idolatries: wealth, power, nationality, ethnicity, religious zeal, isms of all kinds...the list goes on.

Rejection of idolatries allows me to embrace the transcendent Spirit who is not only beyond the bounds, but at the center, in you and in your neighbor, and of course, in my grandchildren and their parents. And, in embracing the holy, one hopes to be able to avoid sinking into triviality.

In Luke 10: 25-28, "A Scribe came to Jesus and asked him, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?" He said in reply, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.' Jesus answered, 'you have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.'" As the text moves on, it turns out that one of the neighbors is part of a group identified as the enemy.

As I first said, morality is a quest for and pursuit of all that gives life. Eternal life begins in this world.

You know what I think? Pay attention to morality and forget about courage. Courage will take care of itself and often come from a Source that will surprise you.

This talk was given as part of a panel presentation. Chaplains, Debra Blank, Jewish Chaplain, Naila Baloch, Muslim Chaplain, Lynn Cooper, Catholic Chaplain and Rachael Pettengill, Protestant Chaplain, completed the panel. Their presentations will be posted at a later date.