



Feb 23: Courage to be First | Philippians 3:10-16

The world **does** tell us that having courage is all about being strong, brave, and even perfect. We can't have any flaws. Cover up the blemishes, hide the wrinkles!

But what if being courageous is less about putting on your superhero cape and more about having the courage to be vulnerable and real. And that real courage is gracious and also requires us to step out of our own comfort zones.

That true courage puts others before ourselves, stands up for others and gives voice to their concerns.

Courage to be last. Having the mindset of Christ is not about putting ourselves down, but firmly put ourselves last. SO THAT others can be first. We get out of the way, we create space for others, advocating for their needs.

What if being courageous is now, today, also about having the courage to be first.

Having the courage to be first.

According to Paul, having the courage to be first means being first in **acknowledging** the goal in wanting to know Christ personally, **motivating** ourselves toward knowing Christ, **allowing** God to change and mature our thinking about Christ all throughout our lives.

It is the courage to be the one primarily responsible for our spiritual lives. We don't have to be reminded or nagged. We own it and take responsibility for our need to know Christ.

It's kind of like the spiritual equivalent of taking out the garbage. Taking the responsibility to grow spiritually.

That courage, that's the kind of courage our church needs.

It is that exact kind of courage we need to not only make changes in our own lives, but the kind of courage we need as we rebuild, being in a rebuilding phase here at BUMC.

**We know what this kind of courage is like. We know it when we see it. And we are seeing it.**

The wonderful Armah's had the courage to be first, to initiate with the pastor and express their desire for their kids to be baptized.

And it was such a wonderful privilege to be a part of that day with them. To see their beautiful family, hear them take vows, to hold and baptize, their children.

**We know what this kind of courage looks like.**

Later in the service, we will welcome three adults as new members of our church. They had the courage to be first, to attend the class and say yes to what God is doing here and yes to what God wants to do through them.

**We know this kind of courage when we see it.**

We know the Outreach Task Force has met and is planning good things. That's exciting!

And I wish you could have been there last Sunday to see the Youth Task Force gather.

I came away so encouraged. I saw their courage to initiate, pull together as a team, saw their passion and experience with youth.

We know courage when we see it! And we are seeing it!

When I was working at Bemidji Covenant, a church of 800 to 1,000 attenders. I met a woman as I oversaw Congregational Care, named Betty. I served hundreds of people who needed care over six years, but I remember Betty.

Her health was beginning to fail, she had to transition to more care. Which was so very hard for her to accept. She had been a fiercely independent woman her whole life, having never married, having no kids.

I started visiting her once a month. But she was always a bit of a mystery. Hard to determine where she was with the Lord. A bit stoic and quiet. But one day she solved any mystery I might have had about her, at her own funeral of all places.

The pastor had been working with Betty over the last few months to prepare for her funeral. During the funeral he stated that Betty had picked out only one scripture passage for her funeral. And my curiosity was piqued.

I don't know about you, but whenever I hear a person has picked out a certain song or scripture, it's kind of their voice beyond the grave.

It is like their final words they want to be remembered by.

The pastor set it up very carefully, drawing out the tension...we were all on the edge of our seats. He said, here is her one and only scripture verse to help you know the kind of woman Betty was.

**"<sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings..."**

You could have heard a pin drop.

She wanted Christ. In all her stoic Scandinavian succinctness, she absolutely nailed it! It made for a memorable funeral and a powerful witness.

The rest of the Pastor's meditation included mentioning the many quiet acts of service and support she gave to the church, reflecting that singular goal of knowing Christ.

What do you want said about you at your funeral? Will they hear knowing Christ was a goal?

As we turn to our text, we come to some of the most passionate words Paul ever wrote!

We see Paul's passion and courage, to be first in acknowledging his desire for Christ.

In verses 10 we see not only Paul's singular focus, his one goal, but also his very real hunger. **<sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ...**

It's interesting to note, the NIV version is "**I want to know Christ**" and the New International Reader's Version states it, "**I want to know Christ better**."

Slightly different translations, slightly different energies behind them. Both helpful.

In the NIV version, **I want to know Christ!**, we hear his desire, his longing and strong passion. One commentator said Paul almost sounds desperate.

But I also like the NIRV version in that it expresses progression and movement. "**I want to know Christ better**." Which acknowledges, I think in a helpful way, that we never fully arrive at knowing Christ. I know Christ but I can always know him better.

In Paul's day there were Christians who believed that they had attained all the knowing of Christ that was needed. They had felt they arrived, they were content and comfortable.

But Paul never claimed he had reached his goal but in humility was always pursuing Christ. Paul never took himself off the hook, but allowed some tension to remain, to motivate him onward toward Christ.

But just like any goal we set for ourselves...especially if it is a great goal, sometimes it's a struggle and requires great effort. Life gets in the way. Our commitment lags.

Paul admits in verse 12, **I have not yet reached my goal.**

But then we might expect Paul to go into describing his difficulties in reaching his goal...Kings put me in prison because they don't like me very much when I preach Jesus is the King of Kings.

Or complaining that Jewish religious officials don't invite me out to lunch anymore because certainly the Messiah would have been a better Jew than Jesus had been?

But Paul doesn't waste a second complaining. Instead, he described the energy and effort he was expending to reach his goal. Because he was always teaching us through his example.

**So, I keep pushing myself forward to reach it. ...I forget what is behind me. I push hard toward what is ahead of me. <sup>14</sup> I push myself forward toward the goal...Christ Jesus himself.**

He knew he had to keep pushing himself, forgetting anything that could slow him down. Three times he mentions he keeps pushing or pushes himself, he owned his need to motivate himself.

Here is another way to look at it. If Paul could take a picture of what our inner spiritual focus and energy expenditure in knowing Christ SHOULD look like.

It would look LESS like this...

Less like lounging around, being cozy and comfortable. Less seeking warmth and sunshine for the perfect nap.

And more like this...

Striving, trying, exerting ourselves.

And then Paul, himself having experienced a radical adjustment of his thinking and understanding on the Road to Dasmascus, concluded his teaching with this phrase in verse 15.

**15, "So all of us who are grown up in the faith should see things this way. Maybe you think differently about something. But God will make it clear to you.**

Paul understood people and understood the urgent need to change one's thinking more than most.

He knew how we can sometimes get fixed in our thinking. He really thought he was doing God a favor in persecuting and killing those early Christians. God had to step in and radically readjust his thinking. But Paul was willing.

In my life, I used to look at artificial intelligence as a little bit evil. I shunned it as immoral.

But God is showing me it can be a great tool, when used wisely. It helps me facilitate ministry efforts...helping me craft Lenten meditations, remember the Early Word on Jubilee?, helped me type up my new office hours.

God is showing me that changing my thinking is actually creating more avenues for God to be worshipped and known. Paul is inviting us to have open minds, for Christ.

Are there ways you have become a little fixed in your thinking, in how you think must be? Church is changing and our church is facing changes.

But if we are willing, God will help us see how he is at work in the midst of his church. God will find ways to help us think differently, to help us keep growing in Christ.

As we close, we've been reflecting on having the courage to be first, like Betty's goal in wanting to know Christ, in striving like a Bengal Tiger in our spiritual lives, first in allowing God to change our minds even about church and artificial intelligence.

Instead of our Time of Reflection this month, we've been closing in prayer. Allow me to pray for us.

Dear Jesus, we thank you for Paul and for these scriptures that focus and challenge us. For this wake up call to have the courage to want to know You, to want to pursue You, and to be willing for God to change our thinking about spiritual things.

May we go forth from this time together ready for a life filled with courage to be first, to know you better, to be extraordinary for you Lord. Amen!