

*The Good News of Courage*

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-34

Whitefish UMC

August 8, 2010

- † It's no surprise to those of you who know me that one of my greatest desires is to someday become a grandmother. Although I have no biological grandchildren so far at least, I can say without hesitation that I have grandchildren through God.
- † In a wonderful essay in the latest *Christian Century*, Kay Lynn Northcutt describes how though she was never able to have children, she became “pregnant through her ear—through countless conversations with girlfriends that led to three goddaughters” for her.
- † She reminds us that early church fathers, trying to explain how Jesus the Son of God could come into being through a sinful woman, went to great lengths to assert that Mary's pregnancy quite literally was begun through her ear. For example, the Syriac Acts of John, written in the third century, reiterates four times that Jesus “entered by the ear of the Virgin, and dwelt in her womb nine months.”
- † Although it's an amusing and anachronistic argument to our ears, there is something about it that makes sense to me, at least symbolically. For I, too, have gained grandchildren through my sense of hearing, since a grandmother's most important job description is listening.
- † Many of you know that I spent this last week as a counselor at senior high camp on Flathead Lake. I actually wasn't the oldest counselor as I had anticipated—one of my friends from St. Paul's UMC was there to lead

music and counsel, and he is two months older than I am! His son, who grew up with our son, was also a counselor with his wife, who he met at camp in the days when our son attended as well.

- † As the week began, I wondered whether I could relate to the high school youth in attendance—after all, I was old enough to be—well—their grandmother (though a youthful one at that!) But as our time together unfolded, several youth told me with great affection that I reminded them of their grandma, or that I was someone they wished were their grandmother.
- † What was all this about? Soon it became clear to me that they identified me as a substitute grandma because grandmothers (and grandfathers) are mostly meant to listen, to love unconditionally, and to forgive. Turns out I was invited by a young woman in her late twenties who is a newspaper reporter to help share the “Good News” of love and forgiveness because she knew that that’s what young people need most. And she should know.
- † Having lost her mother to cancer early in her life, she had found solace in other caring adults, along with her wonderful father, who no matter what welcomed her home when she stumbled and faltered. There were times when she wasn’t sure she could go on, because she was paralyzed by anxiety, but somehow she received the good news of acceptance, inclusion, and assurance through the grace of God—offered through faithful older friends.
- † She now leads her youth group in Great Falls and was one of the Deans of this week’s camp. She wants to be one of those who helps young people navigate the shoals of life today, and she is doing it so well.
- † At camp this week, around 75 high school youth gathered with 14 adults, younger and older, to have fun, to share their lives, to sing, to learn to love God and each other better. Sadly, the world that these young people inhabit

is a fearful one. Yes, those of us in the baby boomer generation had the nuclear arms race and the cold war to fear, but at least those things had names and identity.

- † In today's world, unknown cells of terror threaten almost anywhere. Airplane passengers put explosives in their shoes and underwear. Today's youth are conditioned to be anxious and afraid—there's global warming, economic uncertainty, and less optimism about the future.
- † Kay Lynn Northcutt describes her anger when a young boy was stabbed to death on the street where her youngest goddaughter lives. This little girl, Thelma, only nine years old, already has a gastroenterologist—for all her worry goes straight from her heart to her digestive system. She plans a godmother to goddaughter talk about how to get through these precarious times.
- † She writes: “I wanted to lie. I wanted to tell Thelma that every prayer I had uttered for her in nine years was circling her like an insurance policy and that tragedy would never come to her. ‘Thelma,’ I tried to reason, ‘has a godmother,’ and things like that don't happen to godmothers.’ But I realized if I lied to Thelma, she would immediately ask me,
- † ‘Why didn't that little boy have a godmother?’ and ‘Why didn't you pray for him, too, and all children, so bad things don't happen to them?’ That's the problem with lying, particularly under the spotlight of a child's instinctive genius for what rings theologically true or false.”
- † Now we don't have many stabbings to death on our streets, but we do have mothers who die unexpectedly and children who commit suicide, and beloved young people who die in accidents. This week, several of our youth group members left camp so that they could attend the funeral of one of

their close friend's mothers. Fortunately they got to return to camp for one more day.

- † The youth who come to camp are children who seek God's presence and healing. They are growing in faith, but it is not easy by any stretch of the imagination. As the week unfolded they came to me with their stories of love and betrayal, of loss, despair, and guilt. I listened. What I didn't tell them was that if they only had enough faith, they would be protected from harm. They know differently.
- † The writer of the book of Hebrews knew it too. Describing the journey of our ancestors in faith, the writer acknowledges that "all of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them."
- † Not very comforting words to teenagers, I can assure you. What then, can a counselor, whether a grandmotherly type or a vigorous young adult, tell these youth that is indeed Good News?
- † We receive clues from the gospel of Luke in our lesson for today. 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
- † "Do not be afraid." There it is again—that most common thread running through all the biblical stories. Don't let fear—fear of death, of being rejected, fear of having your past always determine your future—paralyze you.

- † At camp this week, I served with a young woman from Helena who I knew only as a cute little girl when we lived there. Now she is in her late twenties, and she went through a terrible period of being lost to herself until she came home to the good news of God’s grace and purpose for her life.
- † We reconnected and began talking about her recent degree in philosophy. Her favorite philosopher is Martin Heidegger. A couple of hours later, I read an article that quotes Heidegger as saying that our being in the world includes a “thrown-ness” and that the only response is sheer, determined courage.
- † Douglas John Hall calls the “suffering of becoming” necessary and says that one of the gifts cultivated as a result of it is courage. All this week at camp, I grew close to many youth who are getting a lot of practice at growing courage in their hearts. Because that’s what it takes to pick up the pieces of your life and move forward.
- † It doesn’t take a lot of courage to get stoned or drunk and just check out, which is one of our youth’s greatest temptations in this valley. Often I hear, “Whitefish kids just can’t catch a break” or “why us?” And to be sure, the extended family of our youth group has suffered a lot in the past couple of years.
- † But one of my greatest joys was to experience how those kids that go to camp from our church are real leaders there. Tara and Elliot, our graduating seniors, are true mentors for other youth. Natalie, Demi, McKenzie, and Janessa—and now Mark Stormes—are looked up to among the campers. JJ Courtney now works at camp on staff.
- † One night, very late, JJ texted me to ask if I was awake. Thinking of his friend Logan, who would have experienced his last year at senior high camp

this year, he wanted to know if I would like to hear the song he had written for him.

- † The next day, Logan’s friends gathered at the cross near the campfire and heard JJ’s song. “Jerry,” the Sasquatch stuffed animal that was purchased at a thrift store and accompanied Logan to Harbor View Hospital, was there too. He was there in the closing worship service as a furry stand-in for Logan.
- † JJ’s song of course brought tears to all of us. There was plenty of sadness, but also lots of hope and thankfulness, and yes, courage. Courage to keep creating and to moving forward, to enjoying life fully and sharing the good news of Jesus so that others might have hope, too.
- † For courage is necessary not for their own sakes, but for someone else’s, too. For the world’s sake, in fact. God will continue to call on them to use their courage for God’s sake.
- † Yes, there are times to be silent and listen. And there are times to tell the Good News, to be messengers of courage and faith and the promises of God. Hear this song from a CD given to me by Abby Forrest, one of our youth leaders, who called me at camp this week.
- † Play track 16 of Eric Bibb’s album.
- † Today’s youth—even the most accomplished--have trouble accepting that they are valued for who they are. At camp they shared how, at least in that one week on Flathead Lake each summer, the campers and adults helped them feel that they belonged and had something to offer the world.
- † One of our youth, returning from the funeral back to camp, reflected on the question, “What if the real world were like camp?” Sisters and brothers in Christ, it is our job to make the world as much like camp as possible, for the Good News is that the kingdom of God is within each of us. And by God’s

spirit, we are called to create glimpses of the kingdom right here in our community and beyond.

- † Yes, it takes courage. But as Jesus said, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”
- † Here’s a taste of what gives me courage: one youth, writing to me on the last day of camp, said: “Grandma! You are such a cool young lady, and if you want to call me your grandson until you actually get one you may—I love you with all my soul.” And then he signed his name.
- † Thanks for loaning me to camp for a week.
- † And may we live to bring a camp-like community of love, a taste of God’s kingdom, right here, right now.
- † Amen.

Sources:

Kay Lynn Northcutt, “A Word of Courage,” *Christian Century*, July 27, 2010.

Eric Bibb, “Good News”