

Standing Up, Standing Tall

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson

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Rabbi Edwin Friedman, family systems theorist and therapist, told this fable:

Imagine you are hurrying along a road, clearly on your way to an important appointment. It is an important appointment, one of those times when your whole life opens out in front of you, when the possibilities for fulfillment are great, the kind of time that you imagine would settle the rest of your life in a positive way, the kind of opportunity you have been preparing for, hoping for.

You are well prepared for the event, your focus is clear, and you hurry along, not overly anxious, but with just the right amount of tension to keep all your senses alive and ready.

To get there you have to cross a bridge that spans a deep, deep gorge. About halfway across, a person comes up to you and asks you to stop for a minute, and you do. You have a little extra time as you have planned this day so carefully, but not a lot of extra time.

The other person hands you the end of a rope, and before you can do anything, leaps off the bridge. You automatically grab the rope very tight and brace yourself and are jerked to the side of the bridge when the person reaches the end of the rope, which is tied around them. Astonished, you look over the edge and see him dangling there, above an abyss deeper than you can imagine.

'What are you doing?' you yell. The response comes back 'Please don't let go. My life is in your hands.' You automatically yell back 'what do you mean? I don't even know you. What are you doing?' Again, the response is 'my life is in your hands. Please don't let go.'

Your mind is racing, trying to figure out what is going on and what you are to do. You realize that if you let go, he will fall to a certain death. Your grip is tight on the rope and a certain equilibrium is reached, your weight and his weight seem to balance somewhat so that, although there is effort, you can hold on.

You also begin to realize that time is passing. For a minute after he jumped, you forgot all else, so engrossed you were in the act of holding on and trying to figure out what was happening. But, now, you remember your appointment, and your anxiety begins to increase.

You look over and see him there, hanging above the abyss. What to do? You look over and yell down 'Try and climb up. I will pull on this end and you try and climb up and I think we can get you back up here.' But the only response is 'Please don't let go. My life is in your hands.' You yell down again, the same thing, but with some anger in your voice this time, but the response, a bit weaker and with a note of pity, is the same.

What to do? The moment you have been waiting for and preparing for is just ahead. If you miss this, you worry, so much will be lost, maybe everything. But you hold the rope in your hand, all that keeps the person at the other end from plunging into oblivion. What to do? Your life feels on the line; his life is on the line.

Finally, you are resolved and you yell down 'I am going to count to ten, and if you haven't started trying to climb up by then, I am going to let go of the rope. I can't wait here forever. If you start to climb, I will pull and together we will get you up. Otherwise, I am going to let go. OK?'

Please don't let go' comes the response, 'my life is in your hands.'

'One, two three, four, try and pull up!'

'Please. Please'

'Five, six, seven'

'Please'

'Eight, nine, ten.'

Friedman tells this story as a lesson about co-dependency, about our all too often willingness to enable others in destructive behavior. This is classic family systems behavior and is commonly a dynamic in abusive situations, whether it be substance abuse with alcohol or drugs, or other addictions. Sometimes we enable behavior that is harmful.

But Friedman also means to suggest that we also do this to our own selves; we sometimes will enable our own bad behavior. His fable suggests, obviously, that we are all on a path to the future. What we do today affects what will be tomorrow; how we respond to this moment determines partly what happens next. The future, Friedman says, is about possibility and opportunity.

Of course it is, and so the question for all of us is: what gets in our way for what is best? How do our own demons or our fears confront us and hinder our forward movement? What part of us – either in us or in our lives – jumps off the bridge and pleads with us not to go on? Of what part of our lives should we let go?

I imagine this is true for communities as well, perhaps even for nations. Certainly one thing that has jumped off the bridge in our country is the destructive notion that government is the problem, rather than part of the solution. The romantic notion that free markets always are best for everyone has jumped off the bridge and we need to let that go.

Fear, too, is one of those things that jumps off the bridge and asks us to hang on and keeps us from moving forward. Anxiety can hold us back from moving forward. And that is what I want to address today.

We live in an anxious time, and above all the anxiety is about money. What is going to happen in our economy? I find myself watching the DOW Jones several times every day as some kind of barometer of the world. Up or down – anxious or confident? Will the US Congress do something useful; will they become less dysfunctional? Can Barack Obama both inspire us and come up with the right ideas? Will we have the courage to move forward? How bad is it going to get? Who will lose their job or their home? Can I ever retire?

I want to be upfront with you today: this is a Canvass sermon. It will not be my only one this year, but today is about our upcoming pledge drive, about what we hope we can do this coming year, and what I want to ask of all of you.

After the second service today, Helen Stapenhorst and I will lead the first of three training sessions for our canvassers - the people who will be making calls to everyone to talk about your pledge for this coming year. I want you to be thinking about this and be prepared when you are called, first to say 'yes' to a visit – our canvassers are volunteering their time so please say 'yes' and second to be thinking about how you can support this congregation.

It is not the best time to be conducting a pledge drive, obviously, but we have no choice. After all, our life is our life and we have to deal with what comes our way. And, as they say, another word for crisis is opportunity.

This is what we hope for here: our theme is 'Together We Stand' and by that we want to emphasize both that we stand together as a congregation and that we stand for things. We take stands – for justice and for equality, we take stands for diversity and for our children; we take stands for fairness. Since the beginnings of our movement, Unitarians and Universalists have taken stands for justice. We were early abolitionists and proponents of equal rights for women; we advocated for public education and for humane

treatment in prisons and mental hospitals. We were for peace and for Civil Rights. We were the first for equal rights for gay and lesbian people. We have been ahead of the curve on nearly every social issue of the last 200 years. We have stood up again and again for human rights, for civil rights, for peace, for education, for tolerance. We have stood up.

Last year we stood up here for marriage equality. We stood up on Big Saturday. We stood up in Esperanza. We stood up for Earth Day. We stood up.

Remember at the Democratic Convention when Brian Schweitzer, the Governor of Montana, told states to stand up? Stand up California, Stand up Michigan. Well 'stand up' I say to you. Stand up for what we believe in. Stand up! What good is our faith if we don't stand for something? What good is your life if you don't stand for something? Stand up!

And we stand together – we stand for things but we also stand for each other. This is a community - a community, a gathered and beloved community – not just a bunch of independent minded liberals who hang out on Sunday. We are a community. We take care of each other. We celebrate our births; we mourn our deaths - together. We reach out when there is need. We care for each other.

Together we stand! We stand by bedsides and offer comfort. We stand by each other on the patio and offer relationship. We stand together at rallies; we stand together in our classrooms; we stand together and sing. We stand together. What good are we if we can't stand for each other and stand with each other? What good is your life if you can't stand by someone or have someone stand by you? Stand up!

Together we stand.

Three things: first, we need to ensure that all of programs stay strong. Our overall giving needs to increase about 5% for that.

Second: we want to ensure full support for the Jericho Rd project. We will get a grant to fund a one-year, half-time position. This project is to match skills in this congregation with non-profits in the community. The need is there and the skills are here – fundraising, consulting, legal, marketing etc – this is exciting. We hope to leverage the grant out over several years.

Third, we want to fully support an intern minister of color this coming year. We have a candidate. An endowment fund, the Elizabeth Jordan Internship fund, a generous gift from over a year ago, will fund most of this, but we want to ensure that position is fully funded. Our People of Color group is behind this enthusiastically.

We are being as prudent as we can in expenses – we will make some cuts, but nothing that will harm any of our programs. Please consider giving more. Some of you, I know, cannot – we are not immune in this congregation from the faltering economy. And so it is up those of us who can increase to do so. Consider increasing your pledge a dollar a day, or 5% or 8% - that is what Kathe and I are doing. Or an extra \$100 or \$200 for the year – or more if you can, or \$50 – something. If a lot of us increase a little we will do well. Just think of all the money you no longer have to send to BarackObama.com!

The theologian Paul Tillich identified two types of courage in response to anxiety – the courage to be as a self and the courage to be as a part. Together, the resulting courage will let us face anxiety creatively and confidently. The courage to be as a self is the courage of your convictions, the courage to stand apart and be who you are. It is the courage to be we recognize in our insistence on the freedom of religious belief – to be an atheist [don't you love the bus campaign going on!?] to be a theist, a Buddhist, a Christian, an agnostic here.

This is the courage we all know so well.

But we also need the courage to be as a part – to be a part of a community, to give yourself over to a community, to stand with others. We gain courage by standing together, by committing ourselves to common goals, by becoming a community of faith and action.

The anxiety about the future and about the economy is understandable, and normal. But don't let that anxiety stop us from moving forward; let it go, don't hold on to the rope of worry too long. Count to ten; let it go. Stand with me, stand with the person next to you. Stand with all of those here. Together we stand. All it takes is some courage.

All it takes is some courage.

One Friday evening in December of 1943, the collaborationist police of Lyons, France, servants of the occupying Nazis, undertook to bomb the city's synagogue while the worshippers were inside. As it happened, the police arrived just at the moment in the service when the congregation turns toward the western door to welcome the Sabbath, which begins at sunset.

So, when the police walked in, they found that the entire congregation, instead of standing with their backs to the door, had turned to them and were face to face. The police lost their nerve and left.

And even though the police returned seven months later and succeeded, still, that worshipping community had, by being together and sharing a faith, redeemed a moment of evil. They stood together.

We face nothing like that; we merely face an economy in trouble, but we have been offered the opportunity to stand together and create an even stronger economy, to move from consumption to conservation and to deepen our social bonds, to stand with and for each other and to stand up for what we know to be right. All it takes is a little courage. Together we can face the world. Together we stand.

My colleague Galen Guengerich wrote: Courage is not the feeling that good is invincible, nor is it the conviction that evil can never prosper. Rather, courage is a march through the fear to confront what is evil and pursue what is good. Courage has a cadence. It's the wisdom to know which direction to go and the willingness to take a step in that direction. Whatever your fear, have courage. Face the direction you must go. Then take the first step. And then keep marching.

So, stand up! Stand up Neighborhood! Stand up theists. Stand up atheists and agnostics. Stand up parents! Stand up Christians and Buddhists and humanists and pagans! Stand up! Stand up choir! Stand up women! Stand up men! I mean it - stand up!

Amen.