
Gospel Courage For Families

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Seventh Sunday After Easter

About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. Suddenly there was an earthquake,, all the doors were opened, and everyone's chains were unfastened. Acts 16:25-26

Negative creates negative. Positive creates positive. Negative creates prison. Positive creates release!

This sermon is for people who live in families. Do any of you live in families? Have you ever played dominoes? I confess that I have never actually played dominoes; but I have played with dominoes! I have set them up in a line and watched them fall.

Edwin Friedman, the great family systems therapist, once wrote a parable about a set of dominoes. I remember it often in times of stress and anxiety. Let me summarize it today.

Once upon a time, Friedman writes, there was a long line of dominoes, standing close to one another, and circling back finally upon itself. Every now and then, one would shake, but generally they stood, careful not to start the dreaded, unstoppable chain reaction.

But then one day it happened. Domino number 10101 teetered, shook, and fell flat upon his neighbor. The dreaded process began. Hundreds of dominoes began to fall, and the anxiety became so great that some even began to fall before the wave hit them!

Each domino pondered and calculated how he might hold up, or push back, his neighbor when the wave would finally come! But inevitability prevailed. Hopelessness reigned.

When suddenly, suddenly things stopped. They stopped with such resounding force, that at first the cumulative energy pushed backwards and created a ricochet. Then the wave went backward, all the way back around the system until the last one fell against the other side of the one domino that did not go down. Still again, the process reversed itself, this time milder, so that the dominos ended up straight back up again!

The entire episode happened quickly. "What happened?" they all asked. They turned to the one domino who had not fallen. "How did you do it? What formula did you use? How did you calculate the proper measure?"

"I'm not sure what the difference was," said the domino that had not been dominoed. "All I can say is that while each of you kept trying to hold your neighbor up, my concern was that I did not go down." (for the exact parable, see Edwin Friedman, [Friedman's Fables](#), New York: The Guilford Press, 1990, pp. 175-178).

End of parable. What is its meaning? Ed Friedman later wrote down the moral of this parable. What is the moral? He said: "Put your own oxygen mask on first."

What do you do when someone in your family panics? What do you do when someone in your own family complains too much? When someone is causing trouble? It might be your son, your daughter; it might be your husband or wife, your father or mother.

How do you respond to Chicken Little, who encounters you every day with "The sky is falling, the sky is falling!"

Ed Friedman's parable reminds us that the wave of negativism stops with you. The wave of defeat stops with you. The wave of anxiety stops with you. You do not need to fall down in despondency.

There is always a Chicken Little. "The sky is falling!" But there is always a stronger force of positivism.

I was dismayed this past week by the hearings of the 9/11 commission. I was dismayed by all those who directed their anger and blame toward the New York City police and fire departments, almost as if they were directly responsible for the World Trade Tower tragedy. Then various television announcers and broadcasters did the same thing! They began to ask accusing questions of relatively small miscommunication errors.

Those hecklers only add to the negative anxiety of the world. Rather than take a stand for positive, moral good, they stand on the sidelines and complain that the sky is falling. Much of the media, unwittingly, does the same thing. They are the primary agents of vicious and accusatory lament.

You know what? Every family in the world has someone like this. My family does. Your family does. Whenever you read Winnie-the-Pooh stories at home, they are the ones who relate to the character of Eeyore.

It is hard not to be led into the temptation of negativity. Because negative comments tend to produce more negative comments. Negative creates negative in the world. But the opposite is also true. Positive creates positive! Negative creates negative, to be sure, but positive creates positive! Don't complain about your negative family member: say something positive to them!

My friends, the Christian gospel is never spread through negative anxiety. The Christian gospel is never spread through complaining, no matter what the circumstances are - no matter what the circumstances are! The word "gospel" itself means "good news." The Christian gospel is good news, not more of the anxiety and fear of the world.

The Christian gospel is spread through people like Paul and Silas.

Do you know about Paul and Silas? In Acts, chapter 16, they found themselves in prison. They had been attacked by vicious lament. They had ordered an unclean spirit to come out of a slave girl who had the spirit of divination. (This is really a fascinating story!). This slave girl following them was actually saying the right thing, in a cloying attempt to ride their coat-tails into glory.

Paul and Silas, in the spirit of wise discernment, ordered the unclean spirit out of her. So, then, Paul and Silas were dragged into the marketplace and accused of disturbing the peace, accused of advocating unlawful customs. The crowd jumped on these unwarranted accusations.

Yes, there is always a crowd ready to jump on unwarranted accusation, isn't there? When that person in your family begins vicious lament, there are others who will be swayed. Dominoes start to fall.

Paul and Silas were stripped naked, yes, stripped bare for all the world to see. They were beaten with rods, and then they were given a severe flogging. Finally, they were cast into the innermost cell, and their feet were put into stocks. They were completely locked up, completely paralyzed, completely defeated. (Read the story yourself: Acts 16:1-34).

Or were they?

No, no, no! About midnight, the Book of Acts says, about midnight, when any of us might have begun to succumb to the

torment of demons - about midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.

Yes, the Christian gospel was being proclaimed by them! They were the dominoes who refused to fall. They became the leaders of a family because they knew how to stand for good news, and not for lament.

This kind of stand is powerful, indeed. I believe that any Christian can do it. Any one of you here today, any one of you in any family, in any organization. You can take this stand. You can be the domino who does not fall.

What happened when Paul and Silas started praying and singing hymns to God? An earthquake occurred, "so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened."

Wait a minute! Did it say that "Everyone's chains were unfastened?" Yes, not just the chains of Paul and Silas, which would have been miraculous enough. But the chains of everyone were unfastened!

The leadership, the courage, the gospel of Paul and Silas was so strong that it affected everyone around them! This, indeed, is the power of gospel courage. This is the power of good news courage. This is the power of the positive overcoming the power of the negative.

There is always a Chicken Little. There is always an Eeyore. There are always hecklers. There is always some member of the family claiming a vicious lament.

But there is always a Paul, too! There is always a Silas, too! Right there, in your own family. It's you! You can decide to be a proclaimer of the gospel, a proclaimer of good news, no matter how gloomy your prison walls look. No matter what the wall of falling dominoes looks like.

You can be a Paul and Silas. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, said Paul and Silas to their jailer. Yes, they said this even to the man who had imprisoned them. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

This "believe" does not mean merely reciting the creed. It means believing the good news; it means taking it to heart. It means living out good news, instead of bad news. With that gospel courage, it is not just you who will be saved. It will be your whole family. It might even be the whole set of dominoes. It might even be the whole world.

AMEN.

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