

“WHO, ME? A HERO?”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Psalm 34:1-14

Mark 1:35-39

I have a question for those of you in the room who are no longer in school. Try to think back to when you were in eighth grade, and try to remember who you would have put on a list of people you thought were heroes. Think about it for a minute.

Now, I'm going to guess at some of the names that might have appeared on your lists. Abraham Lincoln? John Glenn? Rosa Parks? Eleanor Roosevelt? Jonas Salk? Did I hit any of them? How about some others?

(Names from congregation)

I think back when I was in eighth grade, which was 1968 by the way, which will give you a clue as to some of the people who were on my hero list – people like John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. (both of whom were killed that year).

Anyway, we all have our heroes, or at least I thought it was safe to say that, until I read a startling report this week that told about a survey that was taken not long ago of 8th graders. When asked to fill in the blank on a survey that said “Who is your hero?” do you know what the most popular response was? “None.” “None.” No heroes.

All the other responses – all of them – were either sports figures or entertainers. As the one who reported this put it, “Although half of those polled were girls, only five women were on the list – all actresses, models or pop singers. There was not a single name on the list who was not an entertainer or a sports figure. Not a statesman. Not a scientist. Not an author. Not an architect, physician, lawyer, or even an astronaut.” (On-line, “The Importance of Heroes,” Gilbert W. Bowen, 2004)

Now, I'm not saying sports figures or entertainers can't be heroes, but nobody else?! Unbelievably sad. Which makes me incredibly happy that the theme of this year's Vacation Bible School is “Hero Central.” We're going to spend the week, starting tonight, with them learning about God's heroes – Biblical heroes, historical

heroes, modern day heroes, everyday heroes. And we're going to help them realize that God might make them a hero too!

You know what a hero is, of course? The definition of a hero is "someone who is admired or idealized for their courageous acts, outstanding achievements or nobility of character."

The children are going to learn over the next five days traits of heroes. One, of course, is courage, being willing to step out into the unknown, face opposition, take risks, and act boldly. Think of Rosa Parks. What she did took incredible courage, because she, an African-American woman living in the segregated South of the 1950's, sat down on one of the front seats of a city bus – a "whites only" seat - at the end of a long day of work, instead of walking to the back to the "colored" seats. It took incredible courage because she knew she would pay a price for her boldness, which she did – but she did it anyway. Courage.

Another trait which heroes possess that the children will learn about is hope. Heroes hope for things to be different, better. Heroes hope even in the face of evidence which says otherwise. As Ted Kennedy said at his brother Bobby's funeral, "Some men see things as they are and say why, my brother dreamed about things that never were and said why not?"

Heroes are like that. I think of the Wright brothers – Orville and Wilbur. I read a wonderful biography written about them a couple of years ago – and I want to tell you, they never, ever gave up on their dream of manned flight – never. No matter what hurdles they faced, no matter how many times they crashed, no matter all the naysayers, no matter the endless dearth of funding – they never gave up. They always had hope, and their dream came true. Heroes have hope.

The third trait of heroes that the children will learn about is wisdom. Heroes are wise, and they work at it. If you look at the names of some of the heroes I've mentioned, they were learned, not just book learning, but learned in the ways of life. The children will learn in VBS the importance of things like prayer, studying the Word of God, education, and knowing oneself. It's not luck that makes one a hero, it's intentionality. Intentionally growing in faith, intentionally growing in knowledge, intentionally seeking wisdom wherever you can find it. You know two people who come to mind when I think of the heroic trait of wisdom – Juliet Gordon Lowe and Robert Baden Powell, founders of the Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts. Learning is such a part of both of those programs – a trait of heroes.

A fourth trait that VBS will lift up about heroes is that heroes have heart. In other words, they love – and it shows through their lives. They love because they have been loved by God Himself. They have been blessed, and so they bless others. They touch other lives all the time by their loving nature in a myriad of ways. You

only need to think of a great hero named Mother Teresa. She loved in her own quiet way and made a huge impact on the world, leading others to love the poor and hungry and well. Heroes love.

Finally, the kids at VBS will learn that heroes have power – and it's not their own power, but power from God through the Holy Spirit. They will learn that these heroes would never have been heroes without the power God gave them through the Holy Spirit. They never could have done the things they did on their own. I don't have to lift up an example here, because every hero is a hero because of God working through him or her through the gift of his Holy Spirit.

During the week, the children will be reminded of some great Biblical heroes – people like David who slew the mighty Goliath. They'll learn of some lesser known heroes. And, of course, they'll focus on the greatest hero of all – Jesus – who possessed all of those traits in abundance –

Courage – when he stood up against evil in the world, and dared to break some of the long established rules in order to do good.

Hope – when he consistently reminded people that evil would never have the final word – good would triumph – which they saw when he rose from death.

Wisdom – you heard in the Gospel lesson how he never tired of learning the Word, learning more about himself and the world.

Heart – oh, how Jesus loved – abundantly, daringly – daring to love those that society shunned; and sacrificially – loving so much he died on the cross for sinners like us.

And power – oh, God's power was so evident in everything Jesus did – healed the sick, fed the multitudes, stilled the storm.

Jesus is the very picture of a hero. And the kids will go away from VBS this week reminded of that in a wonderful way!

Oh friends, it's so important for us to have heroes. That's why the results of that survey were so sad. We need heroes because they inspire us, challenge us, and encourage us. They show us what we can become! As one person put it, "By their lives they say to us, 'You can do it, too. You can rise above the common, the ordinary and reach for a life that is rich and noble and Jesus-like. You can. You too can be a hero.'" (Ibid)

Let me tell you something – that survey was wrong! There are plenty of heroes around today, and most of them aren't famous. You know that! Think of the heroes in your life.

I'll bet some of you would list your parents as your heroes – I sure would. Parents who worked one, two, sometimes three jobs just to keep food on the table and a roof over your head.

Some of you would list, and rightly so, those serving to protect us – people like police officers, fire personnel and those in the military. They give up so much and risk so much to protect us!

Others might think of people who are raising grandchildren or taking in foster children; or people serving as Scout leaders, teaching young people skills that will serve them well for life!

Anybody in education is a hero to me! Every time I teach a class, I'm reminded how hard their job is, and how much they give of themselves for their students.

I could go on and on, but you know who your heroes are. My question to you is – do they know that you think that? As Bette Midler sang, "Did you ever know you were my hero?" If not, tell them. Write them a note. Give them a call. They may have no idea how they inspire you and encourage you, and make you feel better about life. I challenge you to do that this week – just let one hero in your life know what they mean to you.

And if that happens, if notes go out to heroes this week, I can guarantee that some of you here will get one – because when I look out, I see some heroes. I've seen the lives you've touched, the people you've inspired and encouraged, the lessons you've taught. Your courage in the face of adversity and obstacles has been seen by others. The hope that you have found through your faith shines through. We see the ways you work at wisdom – studying, worshiping, praying. We know your heart by the love you've showered on others. We see the power of God through the things you've done.

Some of you are heroes, and hopefully, this week, our young people will see that they can be God's heroes too! You know, there's a theme verse for the whole week that is from Psalm 34 that goes like this: "Do good, seek peace, and go after it!" Every night they will recite that verse, so that long after VBS is over, they'll know it by heart. "Do good, seek peace, and go after it!" If they do that, indeed, if we do that, there's a good chance we might be one of God's heroes and make someone else's life better.

So let me close this morning with a story of two heroes in the hope that their story will inspire you, encourage you, show you what you can become, and indeed, as that person said, "You can do it too!"

Before I begin, I want to give a word of thanks to Marge and Henry Jacobs who shared it with me after they heard the great Tony Campolo preach last week at the Ocean City, New Jersey Tabernacle. It's a story about one of our modern day heroes – Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa.

Bishop Tutu was once asked how it was that he came to be in the ministry, and this is what he said. When he was a young child in segregated South Africa, a country still mired in apartheid, persons of color, as he is, were expected, as they walked down the street and happened upon a white person – they were expected to step off the curb into the street to let the white person pass by – and – as they passed by, the person of color was expected to bow to the white person. That's just the way it was in those days, and as you can imagine, it was demeaning and degrading for persons of color to have to live like that – but they did it to avoid punishment.

Well, one day, young Desmond and his mother were walking down the street, and lo and behold, a white man came towards them. This white man was wearing a black shirt with a white collar around his neck. Just as he approached them, and they prepared to step off the curb, instead they were taken aback when he himself stepped off the curb to allow them to pass, and as they did, he touched the brim of his hand and nodded respectfully to them.

Desmond asked his mother what had happened, and she explained that he was a man of God, a clergyman, and do you know what Desmond replied? “Then I want to be one too!”

Now, imagine, that one seemingly small act, not only changed the course of Desmond Tutu's life, but in reality, helped change the course of an entire nation, and shaped the life of one whose love and faith has touched the whole world. The love and respect of one hero helped create the life of another!

Oh my dear friends, “Do good, seek peace, go after it!” because our world needs real heroes now more than ever. May it be so.

Amen.