

SEPT 8, 2024

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Sept 1 sermon— ‘Heroes and Villains : Jesus Christ’ Matthew 9:9-13, Luke 23:33-43

This week in our Heroes and Villains series we land on one who had to appear in the series and really wrap it up, Jesus. Jesus is the center of our faith. He appears in some way shape or form in every message. Even though every message isn't about the person of Jesus directly, the points offered about life, faith, and being right before God are tied directly to Christ.

He is the hero of heroes. No, He isn't putting the bad guys in jail, he isn't getting retribution on someone who has wronged Him or His family, He isn't involved in any kind of competitive sport, none of that. Jesus is about much bigger things.

Salvation is certainly part of His mission and plan, but it's not the only part.

For our purposes let's once again define heroic. It isn't meeting the base expectations of a human being. It's going above and beyond. And not just above and beyond in any fashion. It revolves around selflessness, sacrifice, and looking out for the good of others.

This is the definition not just of Jesus' death but also of His entire ministry.

His ministry is the epitome of heroic. He is bravely standing up against the religious powers of the day that have held people under their thumb for far too long. In doing so he ends up siding with the so called dregs. With the “sinners”. With the ones He wasn't supposed to associate with because they didn't measure up in the eyes of the religious and self-righteous.

He gave hope to those who didn't have it. The ones who were told they were worthless? He showed them they had value. The ones who were condemned? He forgave. The ones who were overlooked? He saw and welcomed.

The woman at the well. The woman caught in adultery. The thief next to Him on the cross. Even His disciples. Common rough and tumble fishermen. Matthew, a tax collector. A zealot, meaning someone who was part of a group happily embracing even violent means to overthrow oppression. His inner circle was made up of folks other folks might consider “less than” the rest.

He did this to the ridicule and disdain of the religious crowd. The ones they criticized He embraced. To those He embraced He was a hero. To those he defied He was a villain.

To everyone He was an unknown Messiah. Those who saw Him as such to some degree misunderstood His true purpose. The ones who hated Him refused to see Him as anything but a rabble rouser. Whether they misunderstood His identity or outright denied it didn't matter. He came to show us what love and devotion to God look like. He wouldn't compromise.

That's a hero.

Power didn't matter to Him. Gaining it for Himself wasn't even a consideration. Political power didn't sway Him. Even to Pilate He chose to answer or refuse to answer based on His own terms, not the terms of the one who could release Him. Religious powers didn't matter to Him. His harshest words were for those religious authorities. Why?

They were more concerned with their own idea of what it meant to be faithful, not God's. They held people under the thumb of their rules rather than helping them live out the love and grace that the scriptures were intended to inspire. Never forget that the issue with the prophets in terms of Israel's disobedience revolved primarily around their mistaking sacrifice, prayer, and worship for faith. Far above those things God desired their love for Godself and for them to genuinely love one another. Revisit the Sermon on the Mount to see how Jesus pushed people to dig beneath what they were told to see the heart implications and real implications of how they understood the rules of their faith.

As we saw with Paul, a major issue with the religious was they simply bought what had been passed down for generations regarding interpretation, and Jesus dared to push back against it.

This was His ministry. His ultimate sacrifice is truly the stuff of heroes.

There was no reason for Him to be hated, maligned, and certainly not executed. Not in earthly regards. He healed, held people to account, loved, and tried to teach those around Him how to honor

and obey God. There is no sensibility that someone whose message was to love God and love one another, and who lived it radically, would be deserving of any such treatment.

Jesus knew that to question the model set in place by the world would be to upset those who benefited from it. It would upset those who had gotten comfortable living in its constraints. The hero would be made the villain while the villains might be celebrated as heroes.

Knowing all of this He courageously and compassionately set about His mission. He did it to ensure that we would have a model to follow. This is one of the great tragedies of today thousands of years later. How many people follow the Jesus that someone else has painted for them rather than the Jesus revealed genuinely in scripture. As much as any of that, His goal was perhaps even grander.

He came to bring redemption to all of creation.

This unfair treatment. This twisting of who He was to try to stifle His message would lead to an undeserved sacrifice that would offer grace to the world. His words on the cross “forgive them” in the midst of this unjust punishment as He breathed His last to secure our redemption is heroism beyond heroism.

There was nothing He could be offered that would merit this kind of gift. What He was offered on the cross, an excruciating death, certainly isn't the kind of reward His love and actions deserve. He offered Himself anyway.

And perhaps the reason for His following through is at the root of most heroism. It had nothing to do with how the world treated Him. It was about how much He loved the world.

That's where we find the hero in ourselves. It's in the love we have for those around us regardless of who they are or what they do or how they feel about us.

In Christianity today this has become one of the publicity problems for the faith. Folks know that we are supposed to say we love everyone. So they do. Yet find the right crowd or right moment and you will hear language and actions that are deriding, degrading, dismissive, divisive, and exclusionary to people that are different or stand opposed on any of myriad subjects.

Love spoken but not love truly offered or felt. People see right through it.

This isn't the Jesus of the gospels. Yes He had harsh words of accountability for those he opposed and who opposed Him. And yes, He died for each and every one of them to have the opportunity to receive abundant grace and pardon of sin. He died just as much for Peter as He did for Judas.

The question is what we do with that grace and that offer. Will we truly accept the call to follow Him? This following is more than a morality or set of rules. It is this heroic love that extends unconditionally. There is no distinction among people when it comes to our love. Jesus made no distinction in who we are to serve and love.

Always keep in mind it doesn't mean always agreeing or condoning. It doesn't mean opening ourselves to attack after attack. It doesn't mean that sometimes the only way for us, human as we are, to love someone who has hurt us deeply might be to put some space between us and them for a time.

It does mean that our hearts remain always soft. Always ready to receive when someone extends an olive branch. Always ready to forgive regardless of receiving an apology. Always ready to help where and when we can no matter the person or people. Always being ready to have compassion, to know another's story, even if we can't fully understand why they are who and how they are.

Always willing to embrace the spirit of “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”

When we truly follow the heart of Christ we enter into the world of the heroic. His heroism didn't just save one life, or one million. It redeemed the souls of countless people through every age. Even when compromised, His message still resonates even today for those who are willing to dig into His life and follow Him.

Those who embrace this heroic, radical love continue to transform lives and all of creation. We are called to be those heroes.