



First United Methodist Church - Moweaqua, Illinois

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Heroes and Zeroes

Luke 4: 16-30

A professor of classics at a major eastern university was teaching his students about the heroes of Greek legend. He tried without success to elicit their concept of a hero. Finally he resorted to asking if anyone could name a hero. Only one student, a girl, raised her hand. She replied, "Snoop Dog"

Well for shizzle (the words "for shizzle" mean "for sure." It's a Snoop Dog expression.) I'll grant you that Snoop Dog is famous but I don't know that he is a hero.

Back when I was growing up baseball players like Mickey Mantle and astronauts like John Glenn were seen as heroes. Today there are many people who see Ben Rothlisberger, Mark McGwire, Kurt Warner that way...although my son Seth says if you have ever met Mark McQuire or Kurt Warner in person you would soon be relieved of those delusions. It is strange to think that we give so much credence and respect to people simply because they have athletic ability. They may be like Michael Vick ...people who engage in illegal and questionable activities, but if they can play ball we admire them (whether we would want to live next door to them or not.) Maybe that is why the Olympics have such an appeal to us. Other than those notable exceptions like Tanya Harding... most of the Olympic athletes are more like Michael Phelps people who impress us with their tenacity, their courage and endurance.

Of course, not all heroes are athletes. Sometimes we admire people because they live courageous lives, compassionate lives, meaningful lives. Senator Barbara Jordan was such a person. Jordan had a trail blazing career as the first woman and the only black person so far to represent the state of Texas in the U.S. Senate. When she first entered politics, she had to overcome all sorts of prejudice and political roadblock, but her fairness and her commitment to justice won her respect from both political parties.

Senator Jordan may have never known how her example inspired others. A little black girl used to pass Barbara Jordan's childhood home each day and think to herself, "Barbara Jordan grew up here, too." The thought inspired her. And that little black girl grew up to be Ruth Simmons, the president of Smith College.

We need heroes to inspire us. But not all heroes are famous. Herschel Hobbs tells about a judge who lived on a ranch near Dallas, TX. When the judge died, his funeral was held at the ranch. There were so many flowers that two trucks were needed to transfer them to the cemetery. As the flowers were being put on the trucks a friend turned to an old man who had worked on the ranch for many years and said to him, "The Judge certainly received a lot of flowers, didn't he?"

The man replied, "Yes, sir. But you know the Judge has been planting the seeds for these flowers a long time." We don't even know the judge's name, but my guess is that he was a hero. He made a positive difference in his world.

I think most of us would agree that a hero should be someone we can look up to and respect. A hero should be someone who encourages us to exceed our own self imposed limitations. A hero might be an

athlete, a politician, a famous business person, someone in the armed services, a teacher, a fireman or a policeman or even your parents. Whoever you chose for your hero, I hope you pick someone who is worth patterning your life after, someone who is truly worthy of your admiration.. and I hope when you are thinking about the heroes who influence your life that you include Jesus. Most of us don't ever think of Jesus that way, but I can't think of anyone who deserves the title "hero" more than Jesus.

For the past few weeks we've been talking about the early ministry of Jesus. We've talked about his baptism, we've talked about the calling of his first disciples, and last week we talked about the ability of Jesus to change water into wine. But this week we are going to talk about the first intentional step that Jesus took towards being a hero. The first recorded time that Jesus let every body know it was not going to be business as usual ...a time when he deliberately chose to trouble the comfortable by challenging their cherished traditions and long-held beliefs. As a result, of his daring words, the general population of his hometown was outraged and cast him in the role of a zero. As far as they were concerned he was anything but hero.

In fact, so deep is their hostility that they attempt to pitch the Lord and Savior of all humankind over a cliff on the edge of town. And they would have succeeded had not our hero managed to escape.

Let's take another look at what happened there to see what visited this outrage on the good citizens of Nazareth.

Our scripture opens with Jesus back at home in Nazareth. His fame is already spreading (v. 14), and no doubt the headlines in the Nazareth Herald would've read something like, "Hometown Hero Returns: Jesus, Son of Joseph, to Appear in Synagogue This Sabbath."

The buzz was good, the crowd had heard about the success Jesus had enjoyed and they were anticipating something big. They thought maybe he would do some miracles for them. But as much as they liked Jesus, they weren't ready to think of him as the Messiah. That would be a stretch.

Granted, the congregation gathered in that Nazarene synagogue was filled with people who had long been looking for a hero. The Jewish people had been occupied by foreign powers for as long as anyone could remember. Generation after generation had endured the oppression brought about by foreign powers, the current conquerors just happened to be Romans, and the people of Israel were looking for **A Someone** with the powers of a Superman, the daring of an Indiana Jones, the firepower of a Terminator, the wisdom of an Obi Wan Kenobi and the military moxie of a George Patton to lead them into a new era of freedom, prosperity and rule by God alone.

"But is Jesus the One? Don't think so. He's the boy from down the street, the carpenter's son. I heard he does miracles though."

When Jesus stood up to read, there was a hush. Carefully unrolling the scroll, he turned to the passage of Scripture we now know as Isaiah 61:1-2a — "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

These were familiar words, a rallying cry for a Messiah, sort of like Arnold's "I'll be back" or Dirty Harry's "Go ahead, make my day." Heads were nodding, eyes closed dreaming of a new future where the oppressed would indeed be free of the Roman legions patrolling their streets, soaking up their finances and monitoring

their every move.

Then it happened. Luke makes a big deal of saying that Jesus abruptly stopped reading, rolled up the scroll, handed it to the attendant and sat down. And as if to add an exclamation point, Jesus says, “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Eyes popped open, and faraway looks turned to puzzled stares. He had stopped reading.

Where was the rest? After all, there was a lot more to that reading...what about the part that talked about the “day of vengeance of our God”? How come Jesus left the good part out? Why didn’t he read that? That’s what a true hero, a true messiah, is supposed to be about — about justice, power, the destruction of infidels and enemies. He’s supposed to be the white-hat rider on the pale horse — the swashbuckling, sword-wielding sea captain — the decorated soldier standing knee-deep in hand grenades, holding off the charging enemy horde.

But Jesus was not about to conform to anyone else’s pre-conceived misconceptions. . Verse 22 reads that, “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” But the context of what follows indicates that the “amazement” of the synagogue crowd did not last long. The people at the synagogue soon became shocked, disgusted, and angry. Where were the miracles for the hometown folks? They didn’t want to hear about mercy and grace. They wanted vengeance. They wanted all infidels especially the Romans to die terrible deaths. They had watched too many men from their villages die long agonizing deaths on Roman crosses. How could Jesus, one of their own...Joseph’s son , suggest that these Romans...these monsters should not be annihilated by God? In bold and shocking terms, Jesus was announcing that the Messiah would be a man of mercy and peace. The Messiah would be more interested in helping the poor than standing over the smoldering bodies of dead Gentiles.

This was not the happy ending for which these people had bought their tickets. Sensing their indignation, Jesus adds a dramatic plot twist by reminding the people of two times in their own history where God extended mercy to outsiders — to a Gentile woman (the widow of Zarephath) and even a staunch enemy of Israel (Naaman the Syrian). God helped these outsiders over and against the needs of God’s own people. This Messiah, God’s Messiah, was about to embark on a mission of doing the same thing — bringing grace to those who most desperately needed it regardless of their affiliation, heritage or status.

Let me tell you, a sure way to go from a hero to a zero is to remind people of the painful realities of their own history. It takes only a few minutes for the hometown fans who want no part of making nice with the opposition to change their minds about Jesus.

And this is the way it would be for the next three years. Jesus called people to own up to their ancient and original mission as God’s chosen people — to be a light to the whole world — but often they found it a whole lot more satisfying to hunt down their enemies and destroy them — rather than understand them, love them and extend the olive branch of peace.

So Jesus found himself suddenly very alone, surrounded by a teeming and steaming mob of his former friends and maybe even family. Jesus was in a no-win situation. It was a Butch and Sundance moment with Jesus finding himself on the edge of a cliff facing two choices — jump or be pushed.

Who knows? Someday, if you’re truly following Christ, you may be faced with the same choice. When Jesus

told the truth, it put people on edge, and the result was their pushing him to the brink of his very life. But that's where we're called to live, and that's where heroes are made. In 1962 Martin Luther King Jr. and other activists prepared to march on Washington, calling for a change in a country marred by years of racial prejudice and injustice. King's stand cost him his life. But in his sacrifice, hundreds of thousands, including our current president, found inspiration and courage to continue the fight — not with guns and swords, but with love.

The question for us is whether we'll be part of the crowd, swayed by popular opinion, political correctness and self-preservation, or are we willing to sometimes stand alone, speaking the truth regardless of the outcome. Are we ready to authentically follow Jesus to the edge? Are we willing and able to live a heroic life, confronting the injustices, prejudices and false assumptions of our world? Are we willing to take a risk ...to be the object of gossip and ridicule to make all things work together for "good" in our communities? Or we going to be like the Nazareth synagogue crowd, ready to toss Jesus off the cliff because just because we don't like the truths he is telling.

In the movies real heroes always win no matter how bad the situation seems. But it doesn't always work out that way in real life. Sometimes we call people heroes because they end up giving their lives for the things they believed in. Jesus somehow escapes the crowd that day in Nazareth — just walks through it. But this is not the last time the crowd turns on Jesus....who can forget the horrors of Good Friday however, on Easter Sunday morning —Jesus walked away from that one as well.

There are plenty of people out there just waiting for a hero to save the day. And it doesn't take washboard abs, fame and fortune and an AK-47 to make it happen. All it takes is the courage that comes from knowing who we are and whose we are, and a willingness to take a stand for the one who took the cross for you. .