

2 readings on July 1, 2018:

Luke 9:57-62

Ephesians 4:31-5:2

sermon title: "My Hero" (by Fred Mendez) (also recorded and burned to CD)

I realize as we went along this morning that it would be wonderful if I had crafted a 5-minute sermon.

Too bad.

I did not think of that. But let's pray through the pauses that may come as I try to edit on the fly.

The first scripture reading that Tracy read is from Luke chapter 9. It's got to be Jesus using hyperbole again, because it just seems too hard for us to follow. Someone comes up to Jesus and says, "I'll follow you wherever you go." Jesus says, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests but I have nowhere to even lay my head." I'm sure there're more words. Something like, "You sure you want to come? Do you have what it takes?"

To another Jesus said, "Follow me." But that person said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

It can't be, can it? We can't even attend to a parent's funeral? Hyperbole, I hope. Exaggeration. Another said, "I will follow you Lord but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

I can't imagine God telling us we can't attend to family and say goodbye . . . in so many ways. But I think the point is that following God is going to be costly. We know it's going to cost us something, but what exactly that is is the question that will not be answered by me today.

How DO we make of ourselves and each other the kind of heroes who honor God and make for a loving and peaceful world? But I do think it is an adventure--I am going to say that. As children of God we strive for happiness and survival, but as disciples of Christ it seems to me there is a kind of call to heroism.

What kind of heroism is that exactly?

I'm not much of a sports fan but my mother's parents were big Yankees fans and now that my mom's been retired and she has a boyfriend who's a Yankee fan, you know, it's on the TV. And I've come to enjoy parts of games that I see there. I caught a scene where Aaron Judge was playing catch, from his position in the outfield, with a boy in the stands. I was listening to the post game show later and the commentator said he had met that little boy after the game and that boy still had a smile all over his face. The reason was obvious. His hero took time to play catch with him. It made his day.

That's the kind of hero I think I've wanted to be many times. It's not the kind of hero that God promises us.

Now on the wall you see a picture of six boys. I know it's kind of shaded, but they're wearing gray jumpsuits like prisoners. They're standing on a railroad track. This is from a story I found in the "Daily Record," from 1933, entitled, "Six Little Heroes and Babe Ruth."

What happened is there was a big storm and there was a washout, like a sinkhole, under a part of the railroad track. And these boys saw this and knew that the train would not make it through that spot. So they went on to the track and waited for the train and when it came they waved the train down. They held their ground, and the conductor brought the train to a halt. At first that conductor had a lot of nasty things to say to those kids but then he got on his knees and thanked them because the lives of 140 people were saved. These young people were hailed as heroes in their time. And they were asked, "What kind of reward would you like?" They answered, "We don't really want a reward but could you tell Babe Ruth what happened?"

Because they had their own baseball team. And what did they know for fun in those days? And I think this is good stuff: they gathered themselves together and went out onto their nearby ball field to pretend they were the heroes they loved to hear about on the radio. Babe Ruth was not just a baseball hero to them. He himself was quite incorrigible as a young person and was sent by his parents to a reform school. I think maybe the six young boys knew that and felt a certain kinship with him.

I don't think we can set out to be heroes, exactly. As you saw in the children's sermon I brought up "Toy Story." I really am a fan of family entertainment. I don't just watch that stuff on principal: I really like it. Harry Potter's been one of my big favorites. I've watched those actors and actresses grow up. I love the world and some of the concepts. Harry Potter was the hero who didn't want to be a hero.

In one of the books, their school was host to two other schools and they competed in these dangerous games to see who could win the "Tri-Wizard Cup." Dumbledore is the headmaster of the school. He gets up and says, "ETERNAL GLORY awaits the one person who can win the Tri-Wizard Cup."

I won't go through the whole story, but Harry ends up being one of the competitors through some magical act. He shouldn't have been--he's under age--but someone else manipulated things so that he was forced into it. But his friend thought otherwise and was very angry with him. Harry said to his friend, "I don't want eternal glory! I just want..." And then there's that pause. Good fiction writing doesn't always say everything; we have to fill in the blank. What is it that Harry wanted? And what is it that we want?

Harry was a good example for us. He really meant it when he said, "I don't want eternal glory. I don't want to be a hero." In the end he proved he wasn't interested in his own glory. He obtained the most powerful tool to bring glory to anyone who owned it--the "Elder Wand." At the very end of the whole series of stories, there's this beautiful scene where Harry takes the "Elder Wand," breaks it, and throws it off a high bridge to a very deep river far below. He wasn't out for glory. Like his headmaster said to someone else one time, "I don't have much time for heroes."

But there's another fictional hero that I really like. I'm not going to go into SOME of the reasons why I like "Wonder Woman," but I did go through the movie a second time and record some of the dialogue and I really liked it and found it to be quite deep and spiritual. So I would like to read just a piece of it for you. She did two soliloquys. One at the beginning and one of the very end. This is the one at the end:

I used to want to save the world, to end war and bring peace to mankind. But then I got a glimpse of the darkness that lives within their light. And I learned that inside every one of them

there will always be both--and a choice each must make for themselves. Something no hero will ever defeat. And now I know that only love can truly save the world.

A hero who recognizes the limitations of heroism.

But what really is heroic? When we call someone a hero aren't we making a judgment of them? When we get down on ourselves for not reaching this or that plateau or this or that stature aren't we really judging ourselves? And do we have a right to judge? And can there be a godly heroism for those who like me and most of us will never be heroes?

A woman named Helen follows every apology she makes with an explanation to make it clear that anyone of reasonable mind would have done the same thing she did. Did you ever know that kind of apology? Did you ever make that kind of apology? Did you ever hear someone who has that habit?

But one day she says, "I'm sorry," then she stops. And she sits uncomfortably in the silence. And she's scared. It's risky. I think that's heroism. She's beginning a new life.

This picture on the wall--here's a picture of the apostle Paul falling off his horse. You know the story. He was a worldly hero. I know what I'm saying. He was a hero in the religious world but I call that religious world, and his take on it, a worldly thing. And this is one of those rare, rare times when God has something that needed to be accomplished, and people weren't going to cooperate, so he had to do radical things a few times. And this is one of them. The apostle Paul was blinded. In this moment he heard of voice telling him he needed to go with someone. He was blind for 3 days. It took him a couple years to figure all this out. By himself. He had to change his entire way life from being a hero who persecuted Christians to being a godly hero who . . . instead redefined what heroism means. He wasn't the first one to do it. He was following the example of his master--our master--the one who stepped away from "eternal glory" to come and suffer, not just like us, but in the worst way like us.

I think I'm going to be able to wrap this up. I did toss a few cards to the side.

I don't want to go into the details of this story but if you don't remember it talk to someone afterward. In 2006--in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania--there was a small Amish schoolhouse that experienced one of these no-word-for-it tragedies that have become too commonplace. And the world was talking for weeks afterward about the way the Amish handled their loss. And their grief. They modeled for all of us a message of forgiveness.

There was a man who went through that with them, one of their own. He writes some good stuff but I'm only going to share this one paragraph with you. His name was Beiler. He said, "Because the Amish can express that forgiveness, and because they hold no grudges, they are better able to concentrate on the work of their own healing."

That reminds me of this saying: "Forgiveness is the scissors with which we cut the string that binds us to our enemies."

This man wrote about how hard it was, trying to show us that even though they were able to forgive they still had to process all this, as we all do when going through the pain of grief. But because of their closeness to their great spiritual hero, Jesus, they were more free in their hearts to heal better and more completely.

As children of God, like everyone on the earth who has been born and will ever be born--as children of God we all are set off on a journey. But I make a distinction--and maybe not everyone does--but I make a distinction between children of God and disciples of Christ. As disciples of Christ, our life journey becomes an adventure. But what will that adventure look like for you I don't know. And I can tell you that if you're like me it will not go as planned. But it will feel like an adventure.

I don't know what yours will look like but I'm sure it will cause us to grow psychologically; to grow in our power to love well through effective thought from which all things flow--words and action. As children of God we all struggle for survival and happiness in this life, and it's a journey, but a life well lived as disciples of Christ is more than a journey: it is a costly and engaging adventure that grows us and makes us into the best kind of heroes.

I wanted to share with you something the apostle Paul wrote. Tracy and I were going to do a back and forth reading, to cover more readings, but I cut that at the last minute. One of the things the apostle said--and it's really one of my key passages, but I don't have it memorized. He said something like, "I don't pretend to have reached the goal . . ." And we might say today, just for the sake of this theme, that the goal may be to become spiritual heroes pleasing to God and really able to do well in the world for our sakes and others'.

The apostle Paul says, "I don't pretend that I've reached the goal, but what I do is forgetting what lies behind . . ." You know--his past, my past, your past . . . "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Not that I've obtained it already, but I press on toward the goal, forgetting what lies behind."

Every time Pastor Jeff proclaims that we have been forgiven in Christ--it's really hard to fathom because we bare the marks of everything we've done, but in truth it's a spiritual clean slate. And we really can if we try--and we won't do it well--but we can keep trying. We can leave behind what is past and become the new people we are called to be. We don't need to climb Mount Everest, parachute from a plane, build a big business, or have a nice house in a beautiful, peaceful community. But we are called to become spiritual heroes, and it will be an adventure for us--a discovery and a life we must make for ourselves, according to the unique persons God has made us; not according to anything anyone could really tell us.

And what is one more thing about that goal? It's that last scripture reading that Tracy read. You see it on the wall. From Ephesians. You've got to believe it takes an adventure to get to a goal like this. Which the Saint--the apostle--Paul (you notice I keep trying to say "Saint" Paul--that's the Catholic in me, right?) the apostle Paul is telling it to us as a command. To be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God."

Talk about a spiritual hero! Someone who can imitate Almighty God?!

I always think about the movement which is so welcome in so many ways--the movement in our world now from going to the point where children are to be seen but not heard, to the point where now they're to be loved and encouraged so that their self-esteem will grow. They didn't know any of that back then, but they believed . . . this is the kind of esteem they had . . . they believed that they were CAPABLE of this. We think of ourselves as animals evolved--and I see the animal in me--but the apostle Paul is telling us that, because of Christ--God in our midst and in us--we can aspire to grow like that. And wouldn't it be great if we did.