

“What Makes a Hero in the Midst of This Pandemic?”

Acts 20:17-24

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

April 19, 2020

Our New Testament lesson this morning takes place towards the end of the Apostle Paul’s third missionary journey. As he prepares to leave Ephesus where he has spent the past two years and three months, he summons the elders together for what would be his valedictory, that is, his farewell address to them. He begins by speaking of his own past ministry, that from the time he arrived he served them with humility and tears which was not often easy because of the frequent plots by the Jews to undermine him. However, wherever he went, he preached and taught the same message- that Jews and Gentiles alike should turn from their sins and receive the love and mercy that only comes through Jesus Christ. In obedience to the Holy Spirit, he is now leaving for Jerusalem, not quite sure of what lies ahead for him. He only knows that in every city, the Spirit warns him that prison and troubles are sure to await him. But then in verse 24, he makes an extraordinary admission. He says he reckons his own life to be worth nothing to him, that he only wants to complete his mission and finish the work that Christ gave him to do which is to declare the Good News about the grace of God.

Paul is not saying that he hates his existence or that life has become meaningless or worthless to him. Rather, he asserts that in light of the mission Jesus had prepared and entrusted him with, threats to his life were to be expected. If he survived, he survived; if he died during the course of his duty, then he died but for Paul, the MAIN thing was to be obedient to his master by remaining faithful to the task at hand- the rest would have to be left up to God. Here, after all, was a man who had been shipwrecked three times, repeatedly assaulted and imprisoned, and on one occasion had been stoned and left for dead- all on behalf of the gospel. He was certainly no masochist but he would gladly give his life if it furthered the cause of his Lord and Savior.

Of course, it would be a great mistake to assume such a courageous commitment was easy or came quite naturally to him or ANY person. Even a faith-filled man as Paul had to endure an internal struggle- between the compassion one feels for someone in need, on the one hand, and the instinct for self-preservation, on the other. The decision is never an easy one and often you don’t even have the luxury to think about it- it’s just a split-second reaction to an immediate situation. But from somewhere deep within, REAL HEROES find the courage to “do the right thing,” that is, to take a significant risk or make a great sacrifice to achieve a noble goal. Only a few miles here--in Shanksville, Pennsylvania—you can visit the Flight 93 National Memorial which honors the passengers and crew who on 9/11 stopped the hijackers from crashing their jet in Washington, D.C. You’ll be reminded of the courage of Todd Beamer, the airline passenger who rallied the others with his command, “Let’s roll.” And speaking of 9/11, that was clearly the case when John Cerqueira of New Jersey helped carry a disabled woman down the World Trade Center stairway even though he could hear his mother in the back of his head telling him to get the heck out of there. Still, he did it because, as he said,

“I had to help.” In fact, when surviving first responders were asked what had compelled THEM to ascend those steps at great risk to their OWN lives, to a man they said, “We had a job to do, a duty to perform. That’s what we were trained for.”

That response is similar to the many doctors, nurses, and first-responders we have seen interviewed on television and the many more who’ve worked tirelessly behind the scenes for the past four weeks. They’ve made tremendous sacrifices, putting their lives and some even their FAMILY’S lives at risk on behalf of strangers they’ve never before met. Take for example the first emergency physician in America to die from coronavirus complications- he was a 60-year-old physician and two-time cancer survivor named Frank Gabrin who worked at the East Orange General Hospital in central New Jersey- a city I pastored in and a hospital I spent many, many hours of my OWN time at. He was known throughout the hospital as a delightful, caring and wonderful person to work with. On his website, Dr. Gabrin shared his philosophy of service: “I believe that caring for others should be an emotionally rewarding, health-generating experience. I believe that there is nothing better than caring for others, making a real difference that matters for them. I believe in changing the world, making it a better place, one patient encounter at a time.” He viewed his work as a sacred vocation and not merely a job where one shows up, punches a time clock, and after his eight-hour shift is through, goes home to do it all over again the following day. Rather, he regarded medicine as a sacred duty, one that involved endless hours with little time for rest in the service of a cause he felt was much greater than himself. You see, he understood that sometimes in the effort to save people’s lives, it might incur tremendous costs to one’s OWN life- which in THIS case, it DID!

But the list of heroes goes well beyond those who serve the church or healthcare professions. One of the most heart-felt scenes I have witnessed was last week on the nightly news. It concerned a mother grieving over the loss of her 27-year-old daughter who eventually succumbed to this epidemic. Her child was not a minister or a nun, a doctor or a nurse but a supermarket greeter afflicted with cerebral palsy who needed the help of her service dog. In spite of the hazards and regardless how badly she felt, she continued to work right up until the time she was admitted to the hospital with viral symptoms. She did so because “she worried no one would be able to help her senior citizen customers walk down the aisle, or package goods, or even find the restrooms at the Giant Supermarket,” her mother said. She was just one member of an army of unseen workers- the people who stock supermarket aisles, or operate forklifts or work in sanitation who often go underpaid and under-appreciated. (Most people do not know that over forty supermarket workers have already lost their lives from the virus? Meanwhile, over 9,000 healthcare workers have contracted the disease during the course of their duties with over thirty deaths so far attributed to it.) I met such a person last week when I went to the supermarket to pick up a few groceries. As I was checking out, I asked the young girl at the register if she was receiving hazard pay for her work during this period. She just looked at me and laughed. There was no extra-compensation for the necessary risks involved but was simply doing what had to be done REGARDLESS because she understood that--virus or no virus—people still had to eat!

But where does such strength of character come from? Where does that something special which enables a person to rise up in moments of crisis or need to selflessly do “the right

thing” originate? I am convinced that such behavior is never innate; rather, it is LEARNED AND CULTIVATED just like those first-responders on 9-11 said- it was something they had been TRAINED for. It is the result of a continuous process of character development and moral education. That is because heroes are MADE, not born. Somewhere in their past, whether at home or in school, at church or in their synagogue, real heroes were taught the sacredness of human life; they were instructed in the importance of tolerance and respect for one another. Virtues like honesty and generosity, solidarity and trust were a significant part of their life curriculum, and when taken together, contributed greatly to their expansiveness of heart.

In fact, what makes such individuals heroes to us in the FIRST place is not that they are willing to die but that they’re willing to die for the RIGHT REASONS, to give their lives for certain ideals and principles without which life would have very little value or meaning. If life has any significance for us AT ALL, it is because it has been enriched by such ideals as love and truth and justice and mercy. Remove them from our vocabulary and our lives and we’d all be wishing we were dead instead; life would be a veritable hell on earth- life without honesty, life without truth, life without beauty, life without relationship. Thus, what we call “life” is really nothing more than the stage upon which such ideals are played out on- where “faith” is practiced and “love” is experienced and “justice” is striven for.

For Christians, the most important factor in the development of character and moral education has to be our faith in God and obedience to Jesus Christ- our HIGHEST exemplar who in the hours before his arrest and crucifixion experienced a very real struggle between THE DUTY HE FELT TO THE MISSION BEFORE HIM and HIS NATURAL INSTINCT FOR PERSONAL SURVIVAL. You see, Jesus was no masochist- he didn’t WANT to suffer and die! Gethsemane was essentially a spiritual contest between himself and his Heavenly Father, one that wasn’t resolved until he finally concluded, “THY will be done” rather than “MY will be done.” When we know that Almighty God--he who made heaven and earth--loves us with an everlasting love and that nothing in all of creation can possibly separate us from either his presence or his love, then we can MARCH THROUGH THAT VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH without fear. “If God be for us, then who can be against us?” asked Paul. As God’s beloved, we are equipped with spiritual resources which enable common persons such as ourselves to reach down deep into ourselves and accomplish some very uncommon things, and it all begins with the gift of his personal presence. With Jesus Christ through his Holy Spirit now making our heart his home, his life now becomes OUR life and his nature OUR nature. After all, who was ever more sacrificial than Christ himself, who surrendered his throne in heaven to become a servant on earth. Thus, every Christian has the SAME capacity to rise up in the face of great opposition and take a stand for what is right and true and just; EVERY Christian is supernaturally equipped to be a hero.

Last Thursday was Maundy Thursday--a day during Holy Week when the church recalls our Lord’s final hours before his crucifixion and death. But that same day was also the 75th anniversary of the death of one of the 20th century’s most famous Christians- the German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. To commemorate such a noteworthy event, I spent the evening, not presiding over a candle-lit Maundy Thursday Tenebrae Service in our church’s social hall as was originally planned, but watching a Netflix documentary about Bonhoeffer’s

life. With each passing year, interest in his writings concerning Christ and the Church continue to grow. However, his life and works took on even GREATER significance when in the waning days of World War II he was sentenced to death and then hung for his involvement in the plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler.

A committed pacifist, Bonhoeffer was virulently opposed the Nazi regime and refused to swear an oath to Hitler or fight in his army, though NOT to do so was potentially a capital offense. He was invited to come to Union Theological Seminary in NYC prior to the outbreak of the war and could have remained in the safety of America throughout its duration but after Germany invaded Poland, he knew he had to go back, explaining, "I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people." Upon his return, he became involved in the German resistance movement, serving as an undercover courier and helping to reveal its existence and intentions to the Western Allies in the hope of garnering their support. He was also involved in secret operations to help German Jews escape to Switzerland. But in April, 1943, his activities were discovered and he was arrested by the Gestapo. He spent his last two years in a German prison until just before the war's end, Hitler gave the order for him to be executed. Yet through his death, his martyrdom provided the world with an example for Christians of not only HOW TO LIVE, but especially HOW TO DIE, even as CHRIST did.

On the evening of Sunday, April 8th, 1945, the Gestapo summoned Bonhoeffer from his prison cell. He understood that his time on earth was now short and in bading a final farewell to his companions there, he said, "This is the end—for me the beginning of life." Early the next morning, he was taken to another prison only a few miles away for his execution. Upon his arrival, he was received by the camp doctor who had no knowledge of who he was. However, ten years later he would write:

On the morning of that day between five and six o'clock the prisoners, among them Admiral Canaris, General Oster...and Reighsgerichtsrat Sack were taken from their cells, and the verdicts of the court martial read out to them. Through the half-open door in the one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.

Several years before his election as President, John F. Kennedy tried to define the essence of courage in his Pulitzer Prize winning book *Profiles in Courage*. In a term borrowed from Ernest Hemingway, he described it as "grace under pressure." "Grace under pressure" would aptly define Bonhoeffer's state of mind in the face of his impending death. But such "grace" was not a natural endowment he inherited at birth but rather a "mental and spiritual strength" he ultimately received from on high. It was "grace" all right- "God's" grace, "amazing" grace, grace that flowed from the heart and spirit of Christ alone. That grace consisted of the knowledge and assurance that regardless how trying the times would get, in spite of the many

risks to his life or limb, God would never forsake or reject him, that his Spirit would accompany him every step along life's journey and beyond. As he ascended the gallows that cold grey morning, he did so with the complete confidence that in his right hand was the hand of Jesus himself, and that as he had told his friends in his parting words, what might have SEEMED like the end was actually the BEGINNING of a whole NEW life that awaited him, a moment he had spent his entire life ANTICIPATING AND PREPARING himself for. THEREIN lay the secret to his confidence, his composure, and, of course, his LIFE.

My friends, when you analyze the heroic actions of persons like Frank Gabrin and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, like the doctors and priests, the nuns and the nurses, the police and first-responders, the grocery handlers and postal workers who without undue regard to their own lives have tirelessly labored to help others during this crisis, what unites them all is that they are all common people who in a moment of decision transcended themselves to accomplish something very "uncommon." They all seem to have a mission to carry out, an obligation to perform, a duty to fulfill, and they have courageously responded with "grace under pressure." They are more interested in doing the "right" thing rather than what is momentarily "expedient," more concerned about helping others than they are in saving themselves. And though their work might not often seem "heroic," by remaining faithful to their calling, by rising to the challenge in a moment of need, their actions have seemed to make the world a bit nobler and kinder and safer for us all.

As Christians, we have a SIMILAR MISSION to carry out, a DUTY to perform, and an OBLIGATION to fulfill. It may involve SPEAKING THE TRUTH in the face of lies and deception; it may mean EMBODYING CHRIST'S LOVE when confronted by hatred and hostility; or it may entail DEMANDING JUSTICE when we witness persons being dehumanized and discriminated against, when others are treated as anything less than all human beings deserve. The fact is that as children of God and brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ, EVERYONE OF US has been blessed with the capacity and resources to be heroic when the moment requires it, and by doing so to achieve more with our lives than we ever thought possible. However, this heroic attitude is never proud or self-assertive but humble and meek, borne from a heart of bottomless compassion and unconditional love. It stems from a relationship with One who imparts to us his OWN courage and strength, and even when fears arise, he calms them with the command, "Peace, be still." And it all began by realizing he first loved us with an everlasting love and the promise that nothing—NO NOTHING--will ever separate us from either his presence or his love. Like Bonhoeffer, therein lay the basis of OUR confidence, OUR composure, and, of course, OUR life, as well! Let us pray...

Father, give us the courage to love and care for others even as we have been loved and cared for by you. Help us to take the risks that such faith demands, knowing that that is what Jesus did and what he no less demands from any who would call themselves his followers. In his name we pray. Amen.