

LOOKING FOR HEROES

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Luke 10:1-9, 17-20

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Across the street from my husband's condo in Roselyn, Virginia, and adjacent to Arlington Cemetery is a park, and located in that park is the "United States Marine Corps Memorial." (See that red brick building in the background? That's where Peter lives when he's not here). The memorial was built and dedicated in 1954 to all marines who have given their lives in battle. The stunning statue specifically depicts one of the most famous and unforgettable photos that came out of World War II, the photo is of six U.S. soldiers raising up the American flag on the Pacific Island of Iwo Jima. The flag was raised following the difficult but ultimately successful mission when about 70,000 marines were sent to take that Island from a dug-in enemy.

Retired Major General Fred Haynes later recounted, "The thing I'll remember forever was the courage and the guts of the kids..." On that day, many of the soldiers were just kids, the age of our young adults that we send off to college. But valor turned them into heroes. Three of the six memorialized flag raisers died shortly after the initial photo was taken. However, when the three living flag raisers returned home after the war they were actually surprised to find out that they had become national heroes. For them, the truth was that they were simply ordinary men.

One of the six men had played French horn and baseball in Johnstown, PA. Another was from Texas where he was known as an outgoing daredevil with many friends. One was a Native American from Arizona, and another one was raised on a tobacco farm in Kentucky. One was just a kid from New Hampshire, who ended up being the youngest of the survivors, and the sixth one was a Navy Corpsman from Wisconsin. They were all so ordinary, like the boy who sits behind you in class, or the young man who lives next door, or perhaps even the man who works beside you at the office, and yet they were heroic.

Often when asked about their heroism, those who survive emphasize that the real heroes were not them but those who gave their lives. In fact, the late Senator John McCain said, "You won't find a hero who will admit to being one." Heroes often consider their uncommon valor to be a common virtue – nothing that someone else wouldn't have done under the same circumstances. If you've ever seen interviews of people who have rushed into burning buildings or jumped into swift moving water to rescue someone else, you have probably heard similar expressions. But if heroism is so common, something that any ordinary person would do, then why don't our lives and our society in general reflect the impact of such extraordinary acts every day?

In today's lesson, we discover Jesus calling ordinary people to do extraordinary things. He appoints 70 people – people as ordinary as any one of us, people as ordinary as the 70,000 marines who were sent to Iwo Jima. These 70 are not just the twelve, hand-picked and specially trained inner core of disciples, these are average followers. Their mission is to go in pairs to every town and place where Jesus intended to go himself. (Lk 10:1) They are sent out not simply to post a few signs and hand out fliers about Jesus' upcoming arrival, but to actually prepare the people in all those places for Jesus' arrival. The 70 are to cure the sick and to preach the kingdom. These are huge tasks – ones in which the average person may feel incapable.

And that's not all. "I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves," (Luke 10:3) warns Jesus. The 70 will face a "dug-in enemy," in other words, they may be in for a possibly dangerous, and life-threatening response. Jesus orders them to "carry no purse, bag or sandals," and to live off the hospitality of those who will receive them. (Luke 10:4-7) Their only weapon is their willing presence and the very powerful message that "The kingdom of God has come near."

Are Jesus' expectations reasonable? After all, Jesus is calling for common people to embark on a difficult mission and to show uncommon valor in the face of opposition. And yet, when those 70 ordinary followers return from their mission, we are told they "returned with joy," and they shared a surprising report: "Lord, in your name, even the demons submit to us!" (Luke 10:17) As those 70 individuals spoke and acted in the name of Jesus, they had a power they never imagined possible. Those who were common followers discovered uncommon abilities – through Christ they became extraordinary.

Does Jesus still call ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things? Absolutely! And we shouldn't have to look far to find those extraordinary people, those heroes. In fact, we shouldn't need to look farther than this sanctuary to find 50 perhaps 100 heroes. Does the thought make you feel a little uncomfortable? Like many of those WWII heroes, we might find the term "hero" an uncomfortable fit. The thing is, uncommon valor is actually a common virtue for those who respond in faith to the call of Jesus Christ. Whenever disciples walk in faith and proclaim through word and deed the kingdom of God there are opportunities for ordinary people to be extraordinary.

In fact, victory over both illness and evil occurs whenever people carry with them the peace and power of Christ into the world. These victories don't come from our inborn human qualities, but from the authority Jesus gives us "over all the power of the enemy" (Luke 10:19) I believe amazing things happen when followers of Jesus Christ step up and step out in faith as if on a mission from God. What do you believe? Do you believe that you and I and us together are meant to accomplish extraordinary things for God?

We have 10 members of this church preparing to step out in faith this coming Saturday as they join with others on a week-long mission trip to Guatemala. They are flying to another country not for vacation, but to work beside and on behalf of people they have never met and who speak a different language. This sacrifice of time and money and comfort while at the same time investing themselves in the unknown is bold and courageous. I would describe it as extraordinary, in fact, even hero-like.

Clearly, Jesus calls ordinary people to accept the challenge of going out and claiming the power available through his name. This is never easy and it can certainly be unsettling for those of us who consider ourselves ordinary to move into the role of being extraordinary, but the thing is, this church, our community, our nation and our world desperately needs to hear the extraordinary words and see the extraordinary deeds of Jesus. Ordinary people are needed to do the extraordinary work of love and compassion in a world that is daily torn apart by self-interest, anger and even the violence of hatred. Besides our ten Guatemala missionaries, who else is willing to take a stand for God's coming kingdom – a kingdom of love and compassion, a kingdom of healing and hope?

As we decide to take that stand in whatever ways to which we are each called, we will have the opportunity to hear Jesus saying, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning." (Luke 10:18) For you see, whenever ordinary followers do

extraordinary things in the name of Jesus, the stronghold of evil in our world is weakened.

I believe God's heroes are right here, found among those of you willing to respond to the call of Christ - found among ordinary people willing to take risks and to do extraordinary work - found among those who are willing to proclaim the kingdom of heaven and to extend God's love and compassion to others - found among those who depend more on divine authority than on human ability, and who rejoice more in God's acceptance and heavenly rewards, than in worldly recognition and rewards.

Jesus continues to recruit and send out ordinary people, like us, to accomplish extraordinary things in his name. Yes, we feel inadequate to the task, but the One who conquered sin and death is far from ordinary, and the Lord's power is more than adequate! So, come to the Lord's Table this day knowing you have come to the right place, because even though we are not sufficient, our Lord is. Through the broken body and poured out blood of Christ we are reminded of what true heroism looks like and we are strengthened in those ways that are extraordinary and that lead to eternal life. All who seek to lead a Christian life are invited to eat and drink and to know the Lord's presence.