

## In Search of Heroes

Romans 12:9-21 & Matthew 16: 21-28

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church  
1001 W. Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616  
September 3, 2017 — 13th Sunday after Pentecost  
Pastor Tom Thews

### Romans 12:9-21 (NIV)

<sup>9</sup> Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. <sup>10</sup> Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. <sup>11</sup> Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. <sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. <sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.

<sup>18</sup> If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. <sup>19</sup> Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. <sup>20</sup> On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

### Matthew 16:21-28 (NIV)

<sup>21</sup> From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. <sup>22</sup> Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" <sup>23</sup> Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. <sup>26</sup> What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? <sup>27</sup> For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. <sup>28</sup> I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

## In Search of Heroes

On one of his programs years ago, legendary broadcaster Paul Harvey told the thrilling story of a man named Ray Blankenship. It seems that one summer morning as Blankenship was preparing his breakfast, he gazed out the window and saw something that made his heart nearly stop. A small girl had fallen into a rain-flooded drainage ditch beside his home and was rapidly being swept downstream.

Blankenship knew that not far away the drainage ditch disappeared beneath the road and then emptied into the main culvert. If he didn't reach her in time, she could be lost to the churning water.

He dashed out the door and raced along the ditch, trying to get ahead of the child who was floundering in the water. Then he hurled himself into the rapidly moving stream, grabbed the child's arm and fought to hold on. Within about three feet of the culvert, his free hand felt a rock protruding from the bank. He clung desperately to the rock as the water tried to tear the child away. "If I can just hang on until help comes," he thought. However he did better than that. By the time fire department rescuers arrived, he had pulled the girl to safety. Both were treated for shock, but the little girl was spared.

On April 12, 1989, Ray Blankenship was awarded the Coast Guard's Silver Lifesaving Medal. "The award is fitting," said Paul Harvey, "for this selfless person was at even greater risk to himself than most people knew. Ray Blankenship cannot swim."

Our theme for today is "In Search of Heroes." Jesus and His disciples were at Caesarea Philippi. Their ministry to this point had been a stunning success. Crowds pressed in on them everywhere they went. People eagerly reached out to touch this young teacher from Nazareth.

The disciples themselves were caught up in the excitement of it all. Jesus asked them, "Who do you say I am?" and Simon Peter answered enthusiastically, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!"

It was one of the most dramatic moments in their time together. Jesus was so pleased with Peter's answer, He said He would give him the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Then — somewhat abruptly — Jesus changed the subject. He began to tell His disciples that the crowds would soon turn against Him, and that He would be killed, and on the third day be raised to life.

Evidently, Jesus' disciples had not a clue what He was saying, for Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to You!"

At this point Jesus turned and spoke to Peter perhaps the harshest words that Jesus ever spoke to anyone. "Get behind me, Satan..." He said. I'm sure that Simon Peter was shocked by Jesus' words. Here he had just called Jesus the Christ, and Christ had turned around and called him Satan.

Perhaps Jesus called Simon Peter "Satan" because of Jesus' experience in the wilderness immediately after His baptism. It was in the wilderness that Satan had tempted Jesus to change His style of ministry, to become a kind of a reality show star — to turn stones to bread, to leap off the pinnacle of the temple, even to bow down and worship Satan himself.

None of these temptations were in harmony with Christ's mission. Jesus spurned Satan's offers without hesitation. Now here was His closest disciple, Simon Peter, tempting Him to forsake His mission just as Satan had, because it was getting dangerous, because it would require sacrifice, including the ultimate sacrifice, the shedding of His blood and even death.

One translation has Simon Peter saying, “Forbid it Lord that you should have to suffer and die.” Jesus knew that He had to suffer and die! That was the only way His mission could be fulfilled!

Having rebuked Simon Peter, Jesus turned to His disciples and spoke some of the most challenging and best known words in all the scriptures: “If any man—[or woman]— would be my disciple, let [them] deny [themselves] and take up [their] cross and follow me.” These are, of course, important words that we need to take quite seriously.

LET’S BEGIN HERE: IT WAS NEVER MEANT TO BE EASY TO FOLLOW JESUS.

It would be good if we recognized that. Someone wrote a book years ago titled *The Comfortable Pew*, and I’m afraid that is where far too many of us reside — in a comfortable pew. Of course, that is becoming true of our entire society. We seek comfort above all else.

Pastor Beth Quick tells about a medical doctor, a Dr. Hilfiker. Dr. Hilfiker is somewhat of a radical. That is what we say about anyone who takes their faith seriously — he or she is a radical. This dear doctor suggests that many men and women in his profession, medical doctors, are seeking the comfortable life today rather than a commitment to a life of service.

Dr. Hilfiker writes that for fifteen years, he has worked as a physician with the inner-city poor. He does this because he believes that God calls us as His people to minister to those who have been — for whatever reason — excluded from society.

Several times a month, Dr. Hilfiker travels to talk to medical students about their work and his. The questions that come from these groups, he says, have become predictable and troubling. Increasingly, he says, he feels like a visitor from another time.

“Dr. Hilfiker,” one of them will say, “what do your wife and children think about your living in the inner city and working with very poor people?” The good doctor notes that the underlying assumption seems to be that he must have dragged his family kicking and screaming into the urban jungle. Not so, he says. His wife is just as committed to his work as he is. And their children’s lives, he testifies, have been greatly enriched by their experience.

“Dr. Hilfiker,” someone else will say, “you’re obviously an extraordinary person.” “They really say that!” he says incredulously. They explain, “You’ve been able to give up a doctor’s salary to work with the poor. But you certainly can’t expect most young doctors to be able to do what you’ve done.”

Dr. Hilfiker is struck that people in the medical community think he is making some kind of extraordinary sacrifice. He and his wife have a combined income that is sufficient to their needs, he says, and they receive extraordinary benefits from their work, especially — especially the benefit of having a meaningful vocation for their lives. He says this more than makes up for any financial

sacrifices they may be making. Try as he might, however, he can't undermine the perception that he and his family are somehow candidates for sainthood.

He notes that forty years ago most doctors assumed they had a responsibility to serve poor people and, for the most part, they accepted that responsibility gratefully. Many thousands of doctors did work similar to his, and no one thought to remark much about it. He thinks it quite extraordinary that today doctors who voluntarily serve those at the bottom of society are considered "saints."

Of course, it is not only characteristic of doctors. It is true of most people. We have become comfortable living in such an affluent society where our every need is catered to that we can't imagine voluntarily giving any of it up. And so we don't know what to do when we come to church and hear this strange Galilean say to us, "If any man [or woman] would be my disciple, let [them] deny [themselves] and take up [their] cross and follow me." Say what? Deny myself? Take up a cross? What is it that Christ expects out of us? Let's consider a couple of things that Christ does expect out of us all.

THE FIRST THING CHRIST EXPECTS OUT OF US IS TO RECOGNIZE THAT THE WORLD DOESN'T REVOLVE AROUND US AND OUR NEEDS AND OUR DESIRES.

This is true regardless of our age or circumstance. There are many young people involved today in so-called extreme sports, which can be thrilling, but can also have their downside. I mean besides getting killed.

Extreme sports are for thrill seekers, adrenaline junkies, and people who to the rest of us seem to be OUT OF THEIR MINDS! You've seen them climbing sheer cliffs hundreds of feet up, or flying down ski slopes that appear to be suicidal at what seems like hundreds of miles an hour, or turning flips on motorcycles or skate boards, or performing all kinds of feats that appear extreme foolishness to the majority of us. Of course, secretly we may wish we had their daring.

Mike Barrett used to be one of those extreme sports enthusiasts. He writes about his experiences in a remarkable book titled, *The Danger Habit*. It seems that risk-taking can not only be thrilling, but also addictive. He talks about how self-involved his addiction to risk-taking had made him, and how much pain he had brought to his wife and kids while indulging in his addiction due to his neglect of their needs. He says that often happens when people are addicted to any pursuit.

He tells two stories that came from climbers seeking to conquer Mt. Everest. The first story concerns a fifty-year-old climber, Lincoln Hall, who was left for dead on the side of Everest by his own team, as well as other passing climbers. These climbers were so determined to finish their trek, that his life was not considered valuable enough for them to stop and help. However, a small U.S. team led by Dan Mazur did stop to help Hall down the mountain. In the process they gave up their own dream of conquering the mountain.

This story of heroism and self-sacrifice is contrasted with another story that took place only days earlier on the same mountain. Thirty-four-year-old David Sharp died after forty climbers passed him and refused to help. Mark Inglis, a double amputee, the first to climb Everest, passed Sharp and radioed for help, but a fellow mountaineer told him: “Look, mate, you can’t do anything. You know, he’s been there too long without oxygen — you know, he’s effectively dead.”

Now think about it: “One climber is left for dead, but is rescued and lives. Another is left alone to die — and dies. This is fascinating to me,” says Mike Barrett. “The striking phrase in the second story is ‘effectively dead.’ Because Sharp was judged ‘effectively dead,’ he was treated as though he were actually dead. But you and I know the truth. David Sharp was left to die so that other climbers could complete their ascent.” These men were left to die because the climbers who passed them by felt it was more important for them to pursue their dream than to save a fellow human being.

In light of these stories, you and I need to make an assessment. Can it be that you and I can become so obsessed with our own dreams and desires that we totally ignore the needs of those around us? The first thing Christ expects out of any of us is to recognize that the world doesn’t revolve around us.

Think of it: some of us have chosen for our heroes people who have devoted their lives to one thing and one thing only. It might be making money. It may be perfecting a golf swing. It may be crafting a style of singing, getting elected to a political office, or a host of other flashy endeavors. It’s understandable that we should admire them — as long as we remember that what they are doing is not at all important in God’s eyes. In God’s eyes the only thing that matters is how they treat other people and what they do with their money or fame or power that help other people — that is important! Is the world really a better place because they have been here?

And, of course, we need to ask the same questions of ourselves: How do we treat others? Is the world truly a better place because we have been here? The first thing Christ expects out of us is to recognize that the world doesn’t revolve around us.

**THE SECOND THING CHRIST EXPECTS OUT OF US IS THAT WE WOULD MAKE HIM AND HIS KINGDOM OUR GREATEST PRIORITY.**

Here is where the rubber meets the road, of course, in Christian discipleship. We’ve asked several times over the past few weeks: Are we simply a fan of Jesus Christ or are we a follower of Jesus Christ? Is His kingdom the number one priority in our life?

Many people claim to be Christ followers. However, there is absolutely nothing in their lives that would signify this except, perhaps, attendance in worship. They are not sharing their faith with others. They are not volunteering in their communities. They are not giving to those who are down and out. Some of these followers have only one virtue and that is they seek to keep themselves free from contact with an impure world.

In that regard, they are like the character Hilda in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, *The Marble Faun*. Hilda lived in a shell of selfish security. She did nothing that was apparently wrong, and she was quick to condemn those who did. But neither did she do anything that was truly right. She brought cheer to no one who was miserable, no balm to anyone who was suffering.

As Pastor William Lyon Phelps puts it, "Her purity was like that of one who hesitates to rescue a drowning man, for fear of soiling [their] clothes — Hilda gave up the world and worldly pleasure; easily enough," Lyons continues, "...But though she gave up many things precious to the average person, she had no conception of the meaning of the word self-denial. For the true sacrifice, if one wishes to be of real use in this world, consists not in the giving of things, but in giving oneself...."

Do you catch what Pastor Phelps is saying? Self-denial isn't about keeping oneself secluded from the world. Self-denial is about giving oneself to the service of others even as Christ gave Himself up for the salvation of the world. The heroes in Christ's galleries are not the Hildas of the world, but persons like Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa, William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

This is the kind of hero Christ is calling you and me to be. The world doesn't revolve around us. Our first priority is to Christ and His kingdom. That means more than simply keeping the commandments. It means leaving the world a better place because we have been here. It means, in short, denying ourselves and following Jesus who gave His life for us and for the entire world.

As we have asked several times over the past few weeks, are you a follower of Christ or simply a fan? It makes a difference. And so I will leave you with this thought. The world today needs heroes who will pursue not only their own dreams, but also God's dream of a better world. As a follower of Jesus Christ, what are you doing for Christ's sake?

2017 @ Copyright Rev. Thomas Thews