

The Divine Hero  
Matthew 17:1-9  
February 3, 2008  
St. John United Methodist Church  
Anchorage, Alaska  
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We're talking today about heroes. And no I am not going to play for you or sing Bette Midler's song, "Wind Beneath My Wings." Thank you, God? Amen!

Each year the TV channel, Animal Planet, names a hero for their work in caring for the animals of our world. Last year Jean Beasley received this honor for her work as founder and director of The Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue & Rehabilitation Center in North Carolina. As the 2007 Hero of the Year, Jean received a trip for two to Hawaii, and a \$10,000 donation to the animal welfare organization of her choice.

Most kids these days probably don't grow up thinking they will spend their lives taking care of orphaned animals, or orphaned children, for that matter. They start first grade thinking that someday they'll be an astronaut, doctor, firefighter, police officer or the president. Little Amy never seems to want to do database entry or insurance sales. It's always something more heroic than that. No wonder that your children are watching a slew of hero shows on Nickelodeon. Shows like *Jimmy Neutron*, *Danny Phantom*, *Avatar*, *Timmy Turner*, *Kim Possible* and *Kappa Mikey*.

But it's not just the kids. Look at what adults are watching these days: *Smallville*, *Heroes*, *Journeyman*, and *Chuck*. *Journeyman* is about a San Francisco newspaper reporter who travels back in time and solves people's problems and changes their lives. *Chuck* is about a computer geek by day and a government operative by night.

An online user poll ranked adult responses to the same "What-do-you-want-to-be" question asked of the kids. Do you have any idea what made the top five? The top five things people had wanted to be one day as they began their more mature formation as an adult was: Rich, singer, superhero, movie star and cowboy. And no surprise, dump-truck driver and janitor were featured at the bottom of the rankings list, as honorable as those professions are.

Honorable, but not always admirable. We learn at an early age that there are people in our world who are admired more than others. The reason I bring this up is because when Peter sees Jesus — *his* Jesus, the rabbi he's chosen to follow — chatting with the two — THE TWO — heroes of his own faith, Moses and Elijah, he's more excited than a groupie in a mosh pit.

Suddenly, everything falls into place for him: Jesus as Hero. Jesus as Messiah. Jesus as the One. Jesus the Anointed. Peter is ready to proclaim Jesus as Hero of the Year and send him to Hawaii. Of course Peter doesn't know what he's talking about.

The dictionary defines hero as a person of distinguished courage or ability, admired for his or her brave deeds and noble qualities. Is this how we are to think of Jesus, that he is some kind of superhero, able to walk on water, heal the sick, and turn water in wine? No, to make Jesus into this kind of figure serves to distance him from ordinary people like you and me. Although Jesus was certainly brave and courageous, these are not the adjectives we normally use to describe him. Although he possessed noble qualities we don't usually talk about him as being noble.

My sense is that Jesus was aware of his purpose and mission on earth, and that he did it with a deep sense of humility. Isn't this how it is with ordinary people? Most people who do heroic things do not see themselves as heroes. They see themselves as doing the right thing, doing their job. We hear such stories from the battlefield in Iraq or Afghanistan where an ordinary soldier acts in an unselfish way to save and protect comrades under fire. Most of what we hear from them after the fact is, "I was just doing my job." Well, Jesus was just doing his job! Thank God he did!

Rodger Parker is a mail carrier in Germantown, Tennessee. On an ordinary day five years ago he saw a car plunge into a nearby lake. On their way home from the hospital late one afternoon, Robert and Betty Byington were approaching a stoplight when their brakes failed. The driver, Robert, said 'Good Lord, we can't hit those cars.' What a mess, we'd kill people." So Robert steered his truck towards the sidewalk and into a lake where it began to sink.

Mailman Parker saw the whole thing. He left his truck in traffic, bolted down the bank and dove into the water. Betty rolled down her window and there was Mr. Parker, just in that instant. Parker pulled Betty out through the window and put her on his back. Two other rescuers struggled to help Robert Byington, but time was running out. Parker struggled to free him but the sinking truck's powerful undertow was pulling him under. Later Parker said, "I just grabbed him and kind of jerked him three or four times until I could get him out of the vehicle before it completely submerged underwater." With Robert and Betty safely on shore, Parker left for home without giving anyone his name. Later Betty said of Mr. Parker, "God is all great, greater than any of us. But the greatest angels on earth are the heroes," she says. "And, Mr. Parker is a hero."<sup>1</sup>

The truth is that many if not all people seem to have the capacity to rise to the occasion of similar acts of bravery. You probably don't think of yourself as a hero, but a desperate situation may present itself to you someday that will draw upon the best and selfless part of your identity as a human being and a child of God. Maybe, just maybe, you can decide today that you will make yourself available for such a time when God will need you to make an instant decision to put your life at risk to help someone in need.

British theologian, N.T. Wright, wrote a book called "Simply Christian," and offered what he called "echoes of a voice." The echoes are desires dwelling in all of humanity which indicate that God has created them with longings. While people can't actually see the divine Speaker, they can hear the echo of the things which the Divine has spoken into their souls. Wright suggests four echoes in our culture: the universal appreciation of beauty, the longing for moral justice, the intrigue with spirituality of all forms and the need for human community. These "echoes" reside in every person and point to a loving God.<sup>2</sup>

What if our fascination with heroes — with a person like Rodger Parker, and our soldier heroes in Iraq— the lauding of their abilities and the desire to be like them — is an altruistic "echo" that God has spoken into humanity? You and I were designed for something greater...the greatness of living to love others.

Today's transfiguration story is common to most of us. Clearly Jesus is the hero or protagonist of the story, but the secondary characters tell a story from the transfiguration mount that we all need to hear. In verse one we read that it was "six days later". Normally that would merely be a literary device of time and place, but as Matthew edits historical

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/11/12/earlyshow/series/heros/main583340.shtml>, Retrieved Jan. 30, 2008

<sup>2</sup> Wright, N.T. *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*. New York: Harper Collins, 2006.

events into a written account, he wants us to see this story tightly on the heels of what preceded it. For six days, the disciples were probably talking with Jesus about his last shocking teaching. After foretelling his own death and rebuking Peter for wanting to protect him, Jesus hits it hard with his disciples: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

So while that discipleship nugget is still marinating in the stew six days later, Jesus takes the Big Three — Peter, James and John — up a mountain to witness an object lesson that will change their ministry.

Sixteenth century Italian painter Raphael visually captures so much of the wonder of this event in his *Transfiguration*. The radiance of the glory of God visibly resting upon Jesus. The prophetic approval of the Jewish heroes Moses and Elijah shown through their posture — hovering below and yet leaning in toward the beaming Christ. The disciples who didn’t ascend the mount that day — roused from their activity in wonder and confusion. And the fear of the Three — sheer prostrate terror felt by men watching a supernatural manifestation of the deity of their rabbi.

But while the transfiguration is focused upon Jesus, the moment is extended to the Three. They hear the message clearly — God loves and approves of the Son. Yet for them, hearing the thundering voice and seeing the blinding glory of God leaves them trembling. So Jesus takes a moment to extend the Father’s love to his closest friends. “Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid’” (v. 7).

But verse 9 seems odd. Why would Jesus tell the Three to keep what they experienced a secret until after he was dead? The obvious theological thread which runs the whole of the gospels is the messianic secret — the desire to suppress the public fervor about his ministry until the appropriate time. But what if this were also meant to be a moment of grace and wonder and approval ... just for them?

As Jesus is leaving his earthly ministry behind, he’s passing the mantle of the kingdom on to his disciples, and namely these Three. What better way to commission them to love the world *than by demonstrating that being Beloved means extending love to others?*

Which brings us back to the theme: *that while Jesus may be the hero, he wants to unveil or unleash the hero in us.* Henri Nouwen captures this idea with the pastoral spirit for which we know him: “The basis of all ministry is the experience of God’s unlimited and unlimiting acceptance of us as beloved children, and acceptance so full, so total and all-embracing, that it sets us free from our compulsion to be seen, praised and admired, and free for Christ who leads us on the road of service.”<sup>3</sup>

*Being a hero in God’s eyes is about being a hero to others.*

What we often miss in the transfiguration is that the Beloved is extending love to those whom he sends out to love the world. Perhaps he’s calling out to the hero in each of them — the desire for fishermen and tax collectors to become something greater. People on a love mission from God. Living lives of greatness for the purpose of loving others, not for the sake of being loved by the masses.

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<sup>3</sup> Nouwen, Henri. *The Selfless Way of Christ: Downward Mobility and the Spiritual Life* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2007).