

Two Kinds of Heroes

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Mk 10:32-52

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Today's gospel continues from last week's reading,
but now Jesus leaves Galilee where he has been preaching and teaching,
and sets toward Jerusalem and the horrors awaiting.
The disciples are not so sure this is a good idea.
Other followers "were afraid," it says, disturbed by what they could see will come.
The tension escalates in Mark.
In times of risk and danger,
we look for heroes to lead the way, to deal with threats, and to rescue.
In times of uncertainty, we look for someone to steady the course and give us answers.
The God who created all and who dwells with all
desires to be our hero to lead and give answers and rescue.
But knowing how susceptible and quick we are to fear,
God gives us mortal heroes that act in God's stead,
people we can see and trust,
while still behind it all God's Holy Spirit is emboldening and encouraging.
James and John, the sons of Zebedee,
whom Jesus nicknamed "sons of thunder" earlier,¹
are two kinds of heroes.
I call them heroes because for all their weaknesses,
they lived and died in service to others.

There are two kinds of heroes.
The heroes that *make the news*
are those one-in-a-hundred who perform extraordinary deeds of valor.
They act when others falter.
They face dangers others flee,
they rush into burning buildings,
they inspire,
they accomplish impossible feats.
Courage, steadiness, action mark the one-in-a-hundred heroes.
We all know extraordinary people,
those whom we admire and remember.
They exemplify the best of humankind.

James, the son of Zebedee, was one of those heroes.
Jesus called James and his brother "sons of thunder."
They spoke with power and boldness.
James was the kind of man whose very movement and presence
unnerved, awed and intimidated.
He was aggressive and impulsive, muscular and big,
a man of action.
He got things done.

James and John jumped at the chance to be at Jesus' side when things came down.
But Jesus gave them pause,
"Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?"
They are certainly able.
They are ready to take on any challenge or task in the name of the Lord.
They will act without hesitation to carry out the most difficult work God will ask.

¹ Mark 3:17.

“Yes,” Jesus said, “the cup that I drink *you will drink...*”
 They *will* be heroes,
 but not the heroes in the way they think.
 James witnessed the raising from death Jairus’ daughter,²
 was present at the Transfiguration of Jesus,³
 prayed with Jesus in Gethsemane,⁴
 saw the crucifixion,⁵
 was called away a second time from a life of fishing
 when Jesus appeared on the shores of Galilee, resurrected and glorified.⁶
 James *experienced the power* of Jesus
 and used his ferocious temperament to proclaim Jesus as Lord.
 Because of this, James also died a hero’s death.
 He was the *first* of the disciples to be martyred.
 His boldness shook the very heights of the empire.
 Herod Agrippa the 1st, King of Palestine,
 violently seized the leaders of the early church,
 dragged James to the palace dungeons
 and ran a sword through James.⁷
 James was a hero,
 and because of him and his deeds
 we are able to worship Jesus today.

Yet there are *two* kinds of heroes.
 James is the kind we know best,
 the one-in-a-hundred who stand above and boldly act.
 These kind of heroes we remember and honor.
 But there is *another kind of hero*.
 There is the John-kind of hero.
 John, too, was a son of Zebedee,
 the kind of man whose very movement and presence
 unnerved, awed and intimidated.
 John, too, was a man of action,
 one who you would want on your side, at your side.
 He might have been the same John
 who at the Last Supper “was lying close the breast of Jesus.”⁸
 John did not die the hero’s death of James.
 John did not die a martyr for the faith.
 It seems John lived a long life into old age and died quietly at home.
 There is *another* kind of hero,
 not one who boldly acts where others pale.
 There is *another* kind of hero.
 The other kind of hero is one who *persists day after day* in loving his family,
 who endures the scorn of teenage sons,
 who is underappreciated, taken for granted, overlooked,
 and *still* returns to work another day.
 There is *another* kind of hero who carries out the routines of life,
 faithfully performing what must be done for this world.
 Jesus told the sons of Zebedee,

² Mark 5:37, Luke 8:51.

³ Matthew 17:1, Mark 9:2, Luke 9:28.

⁴ Matthew 26:37, Mark 14:33.

⁵ Matthew 27:56.

⁶ John 21:1-8.

⁷ Acts 12:1-3.

⁸ John 13:23-26.

“the cup that I drink *you will* drink...”
 There is *another* kind of cup to drink and *another* kind of hero.
 That other kind is the cup of *service in the name of Jesus*,
 the cup of living as Jesus taught, living as Jesus showed.
 “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,” he said,
 “and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”
 And at times it seems that way,
 slave to the demands of family,
 slave to the job,
 slave to the vicissitudes of public opinion.
 John watched over the years the other disciples of Jesus
 be murdered one-by-one for their faith in Jesus,
 and wonder each day when this will come to him too.
 But the days passed and the years passed.
 The heroic death of martyrs eluded him.
 Tradition has it that John moved to Ephesus, away from Jerusalem,
 to live out his years.
 People would make pilgrimages to see him.
 The last of Jesus’ first disciples,
 people would come in silent awe to just sit in his presence.
 It was said that on his last day, when he was 100 years old,
 when he was feeble, weak and could no longer walk,
 he was carried on a cot to church to preach.
 Dementia had set in,
 cognition confused, he could not recognize familiar faces,
 names were lost, surroundings strange.
 With memory flickering and strength fading,
 when all his other words gibberish,
 the last lingering thought in his failed mind
 he whispered repeatedly, “*Little children, love one another.*”
 All that remained in his mind was, “*Little children, love one another.*”
 And that is John’s legacy, *love one another.*

There are heroes who do great deeds of bravery
 for which they are remembered and some get medals.
 And then there are the persistent heroes like John
 whose deed of bravery
 is that of *living a long life* of faith and love and care.
 It is *these* kind of heroes that Jesus trained in his time on earth,
 and *these* kind of heroes that Jesus declared in our gospel reading.
 “*Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.*”
 Greatness comes not with winning adulations and praises of people.
 Greatness in *Jesus’ eyes* comes from devoting one’s life
 to serving the people God has given us in these brief years on earth.
 Greatness comes through the daylong, day-to-day slog of caring for others,
 keeping one’s word,
 speaking the best of every one,
 doing what is right, being generous,
 enduring when things go bad,
 and *remembering God* in all that is.
 Greatness as Jesus taught
 is a life lived for others.
 Amen.