

Heroes

Philippians 2:1-13

September 25, 2011

We are called to be stewards, stewards of what we have been given. And what have we been given? What have we not been given?

In our union with Christ, God has blessed us by giving us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly world!

So Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians. And the letter of James declares:

Every good gift and every perfect present comes from heaven; it comes down from God, the Creator of the heavenly lights, who does not change.

We have been blessed, we are being blessed, and we will be blessed -- all of us -- with the most extraordinary and precious of God's good gifts. And we are called, God calls us, to be faithful stewards of these gifts. That's our worship theme this fall: *We are stewards of God's good gifts.*

And the greatest of these gifts is the mercy of God. We are stewards of the mercy of God, called to give away what we have been given, called to be merciful with others just as God has been merciful with us, to have hearts that are inclined toward mercy just as God's heart is inclined toward mercy.

When we are merciful, God is pleased and God is honored. When we are merciful, the face of the universe itself bends toward God. And when we are merciful, they will know. They will know, all of them, that there is a God after all, a God whose ways are wondrous indeed.

But when we just have to have revenge, when we are ready to do whatever it takes to get what is rightly coming to us, to do whatever it takes to see justice served, when we dream of payback, when we take pleasure in the hurt of those who have hurt us, when we show no mercy, who will know? Who will believe there is any God, any kind of a God worth knowing at work among us?

We live in a culture that loves revenge. When Mattie Ross sets out to avenge her father's murder in the movie, *True Grit*, we are on her side. We want her to succeed. We want that scum of a man to pay, to pay the ultimate price for his sins. Admit it! When we watch any of the countless number of TV crime dramas, we take vicarious pleasure in every punch landed on the face or into the gut of the bad guys!

Our heroes are the courageous, resourceful, unrelenting men and women who will stand up to the monsters and bring them down, all the way down. We cheer payback. We cheer revenge. We cheer ... even death.

But there is another way, God's way, the way of mercy, the way of life, the way that honors life. Who are the heroes who will show us this other way? James Byrd for one. Troy Davis for another. Two African-American men who were part of the drama surrounding two state-sanctioned executions that took place this last week in Georgia and Texas.

James Byrd is the son of the black man who was brutally murdered by three white men, beaten and dragged behind a pickup truck until skin was torn from his body and his head sheared off by a culvert. One of the three, Lawrence Russell Brewer, was executed Wednesday. To the last, he harbored no regrets. "I'd do it all over again," he said.

But James Byrd wanted no part of revenge, hoping instead that the state would show his father's killer the mercy his father never got. "You can't fight murder with murder," he said.

Troy Davis was convicted twenty years ago of killing a white policeman. He has consistently maintained his innocence and did so once more just before he was put to death on Wednesday evening. Despite the considerable doubt cast on the case against him and despite a host of prominent people all over the world calling for a commutation of his sentence, the state of Georgia proceeded with the execution. Troy Davis' last words were these: "For those about to take my life, may God have mercy on your souls. May God bless your souls."

Who does that sound like? Especially if he was innocent, but even if he was guilty of the crime, in the end, Troy Davis embodied God's way, like Jesus did. He embodied the way of mercy, like Jesus did. He was a hero, the kind of hero we need.

He is the kind of hero we need to be. What would you do in Troy's place? What would you do in James Byrd's place? I pray you may never have to know for real what you would do. And yet, isn't it true that you and I face situations every day that require us to choose to show mercy ... or not?

We are stewards of the mercy of God. We are stewards of God's good gifts. Who is? We are! Who is we? We are! The community of people united to each other by our common union with Christ. And this, too, is God's gift.

We are God's gift to each other. You and I -- all of us who take part in the worship and the work of First Congregational United Church of Christ -- are God's gift to each other. The church, this church, is God's gift to us, God's gift of support and encouragement and comfort and consolation and fellowship and compassion.

When you are sick, the church prays for you and visits you.

When you are grieving, the church grieves with you and is ready to walk through the valley of the shadow of death with you.

When you are glad, the church is glad with you and your joy is that much richer because it is shared.

When you need help, the church steps up to help you.

When you have something to offer -- a word, a song, a labor of love that God has given you and called you to offer -- the church encourages you and gives you a place, a safe place, to learn to let your light shine!

If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy ...

Of course, there is! That's what Paul expects his readers to say. That's what Paul knows his readers will say. There is encouragement and consolation and sympathy among us, at least some, and whatever there is, all of it, is God's gift.

We are called to be stewards of this gift, good stewards of God's gift of the community of faith. "Make my joy complete," Paul writes. "Be of the same mind." Not meaning that we should all think alike, but that our minds should all bend in the same direction, toward Jesus.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus ...

Not taking advantage of your position or exploiting your power or asserting your authority, but humbly considering other people to be better than yourself and treating them that way.

Not having to make sure people give you the honor and respect you think you deserve or want to deserve, but assuming the role of a slave, looking out for other people's interests, instead of your own.

Not being driven by ambition, but dedicated to obedience.

Ambition is a curious thing. We exhaust our reserves of energy and emotion, running after approval, seeking honor, craving love and respect, wanting to be somebody, somebody important, somebody other people will think is important. But all of these things -- approval and honor and love and respect and value -- all of these things we already have! They are God's gifts.

It reminds me of the story of the Wizard of Oz. The scarecrow wanted a brain. He wanted to be respected for his intelligence and wisdom. The tin woodsman wanted a heart. He wanted to be able to feel emotion, to be able to give love. And the lion wanted courage. He wanted others to be proud of him for his courage. He wanted to be able to be proud of himself.

But you know how the story unfolds. All the things they wanted so badly, they had already! The scarecrow makes plans. The woodsman cries tender tears of compassion. And the lion, well, when it all comes down to it, when Dorothy's well-being is on the line, he's going in, no matter what!

Now, tell me -- I know you know this because the movie makes it all so clear -- when do these gifts of wisdom and love and courage which were there all along become apparent? When they are thinking about Dorothy, not themselves! When they are not thinking about their own needs, but the needs of another!

The scarecrow and the woodsman and the lion find themselves, uncover their true identities and unleash their considerable gifts, when they give themselves away. When they empty themselves, like Jesus!

They are the heroes, if there are heroes, in the story. They are given the medals, the tokens, that attest to their heroism. But these heroes don't look anything like the heroes we are used to. After all, when Dorothy awakes from her dream, they turn out to be nothing but the humble, homely, ham-handed farmhands on her Auntie Em's farm. Nothing but.

Nothing but?

Nothing but! These are the heroes, the ones who empty themselves, the ones who become nothing for the sake of those they love, a bunch of nothings, who, together, in community, in union with each other, are everything, everything that matters. Which, of course, Dorothy understands at last:
There's no place like home!

This is our job, to create a home, no, not to create it, but to take care of it, to be good stewards of the home and the family God has given us. All that you most desire, all that really matters, you already have. It is yours, and mine, to take care of.

So let us be of the same mind! Let us have in us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, who emptied himself and was obedient to the One who called him ... all the way.