

“What Does a Hero Look Like?”

Luke 23:33-49

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Communion Devotion

Let’s talk about heroes and villains this morning. They have been around ever since man was given the ability to make decisions, which means they will always be with us.

They showed up once again in Colorado three weeks ago when a twenty-three year old graduate student at the University of Colorado burst into a crowded theater in Aurora and started shooting innocent victims. Before he ran out, seventy people had been killed or injured.

For the first few days, most of the attention was upon the attacker, James Holmes. He grew up in San Diego in what appears to be a normal home. Like all boys, he interacted with people, but tended to be a loner. No one who knew him had any idea he was this disturbed and was remotely capable of committing such a horrible crime.

It has been reported that he was seeing a school psychiatrist. Evidently, she was aware things were not right and was reaching out for help. I wish she had found it before he turned into a monster.

In the last week or so, stories of the heroes from that horrible night have surfaced. One by one, people are telling about ordinary people who did extraordinary things to save the lives of others.

Jon Blunk went with a friend, Jansen Young, to the theater that night for the opening of *Dark Night*. When the gunman entered the room, Jon threw Jansen on the floor and covered her body. As the shooter walked up and down the aisles, Jon pushed Jansen further under the seats, out of the line of fire.

When the shooting subsided, Jansen crawled out and attempted to pull Jon up by the shoulder. He didn’t move because he had been mortally wounded.

The tears flowed as Jansen said in an interview a few days later, “Jon took a bullet for me. He threw me to the ground and was like, ‘We have to get down and stay down!’ ”

In another part of the theater, twenty-seven year old Matt McQuinn sat beside his girlfriend, Samantha Yowler, and her brother, Nick. When the gunman started shooting, Matt and Nick pulled Samantha to the ground and shielded her. Samantha suffered a bullet wound to the leg, Nick was uninjured, but Matt was hit three times and died while protecting Samantha.

Similarly, Alex Teves shielded his girlfriend, Amanda Lindgren, when the bullets started flying. He pushed her to the floor, but before he could get out of harm's way, he was hit and killed.

Recently, Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper said, "This terrible incident was marked by countless acts of heroism; indeed, heroism isn't a strong enough word."

In his remarks, President Obama said, "It will be the good people, the heroes who took action, who will remain in our memories long after James Holmes, the alleged gunman, has been forgotten."

What does a hero look like? The heroes in the theater that night looked like ordinary people, the kind we see every day on the streets and in the shops of our town. Even though each was different in many ways, they had two things in common, compassion and courage. They looked beyond their own needs that night and did whatever was needed to protect those around them.

Sounds a lot like Jesus, doesn't it? His heart was also filled with compassion and courage, which enabled him to be brave in the face of great danger.

Jesus did not deserve to die, either. He had done nothing wrong. To the contrary, he had done a lot of things right.

He spent his life, especially his public ministry, trying to protect the most vulnerable around him from those who exploited them and made their lives difficult. He exposed the hypocrisy of selfish and corrupt leaders, spoke truth to power and challenged all leaders, religious and secular, to use their influence to make life better for everyone, not just a chosen few.

When necessary, he didn't mince words and he was certainly not timid. He called the Pharisees a brood of vipers and overturned the tables of the money changers when he entered the temple during Passover. His pursuit of justice and peace brought him everything but peace. In the end, it cost him his life.

"When they came to the place called the Skull," writes Luke, "they crucified him, along with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left."

Why didn't Jesus save himself from this horrible death? Why didn't he leave Jerusalem that fateful week when he realized his life was in danger? Why didn't he run into the night when the soldiers came for him in the Garden of Gethsemane?

He didn't run for the same reason these three young men did not abandon their loved ones in that theater. His heart was filled with compassion and courage, which always bring the best out in a person.

"Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends," Jesus taught his disciples. When faced with this challenge, Jesus did this very thing. However, he laid his life down not only for his friends, but also his enemies.

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” Jesus prayed as he endured their merciless taunts. Their worst behavior brought out his best, which caught his tormentors by surprise.

When compassion and courage combine, they are powerful. Compassion without courage can be intimidated and silenced. Courage without compassion can be self-absorbed and violent. Together, however, they turn people from all walks of life into heroes.

Have you ever thought of yourself as a hero? Probably not, and most people who have done something extraordinary refuse that label. “Just doing what anyone else would have done,” they often say.

If a person’s heart is filled with compassion and courage, they may be right.

Think you will ever be a hero? If your heart is filled with compassion and courage, chances are you already have been, and you will have plenty more opportunities.

There is no shortage of injustice, acts of violence and vulnerable people in our world, as it was in Jesus’. Let me encourage you to listen to your heart and seize every opportunity to confront evil and help someone who is struggling under its devastating effects.

Who needs you to listen to your heart? Who needs you to stand with them in their darkest hour? Who needs to hear your voice speaking out on their behalf? Who needs you to protect them from someone trying to harm them? Who needs you to pray for them?

I have a feeling, in God’s eyes, this is what heroes do. It is what Jesus did.

I am also confident God will help you, just as He did Jesus. He will strengthen you as you reach out to His children when they need you most.

While the bread and cup, which remind us of Jesus’ compassion and courage, are passed this morning, will you ask for God’s help?