

Finding the Hero Within  
Luke 9:28-36  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
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As a child who came of age in the 80's, I can't help but picture Peter in this scene from scripture with a boombox on his shoulder, wearing parachute pants and rocking out to Bonnie Tyler's 1986 song, "Holding Out for a Hero." Some of you remember the song I'm talking about. "I need a hero. I'm holding out for a hero 'til the end of the night. He's gotta be strong, and he's gotta be fast and he's gotta be fresh from the fight. I need a hero. I'm holding out for a hero 'til the morning light. He's gotta be sure, and it's gotta be soon and he's gotta be larger than life. Larger than life."

Here we are. Up the mountain with Jesus and a few disciples who he has brought along. If we remember where this all started - it started with prayer. "Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray" (Luke 9:28b, NRSV).

If we pay attention to the stories of Jesus, we know that this is a common practice. Jesus' life was rooted in prayer. And Jesus often shared those moments with his disciples.

But on this day something different happened. While Jesus was praying, Luke tells us that his appearance changed. Not only that, but two historical figures, both who were central to Jewish history, appeared with Jesus.

That's the point in this story where I start hearing Bonnie Tyler's song.

Peter has been following Jesus since early in his ministry. Peter has even been among those with whom Jesus' authority and power were shared. Earlier in this very chapter of Luke's gospel Peter was the one who answered the question, "Who do you say that I am?" with the confession, "The Messiah of God."

Peter has been close to Jesus. He has been watching the ways that Jesus comes on the scene and makes a difference. And if he didn't know it before, in this moment on the mountain, with Jesus' appearance changed and with Moses and Elijah hovering nearby, Peter has to feel confident that he has indeed found his hero.

"I need a hero," Peter might be singing quietly to himself. "I'm holding out for a hero 'til the morning light. He's gotta be sure, and it's gotta be soon and he's gotta be larger than life. Larger than life" (Bonnie Tyler, *Holding Out for a Hero*, 1986).

What is larger-than-life than this?

So, it is no wonder that Peter offers to build three structures. Three structures to honor these three heroes of the faith. Three structures to prolong this time together on the mountain top.

And yet no buildings were built. Elijah and Moses disappeared. A voice came from the cloud, invoking God's words at Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

We can all understand why Peter wanted to stay on the mountain, can't we? We can understand why he wanted to hold onto that larger-than-life moment with those larger-than-life people.

After all, isn't that what we do with heroes? We want the time we have together to last. And when it ends, we know the bit of disappointment that comes along. Just picture Lois Lane's face when Superman disappears and Clark Kent fumbling behind his thick glasses is her only companion.

We like the heroes. And heroes can serve a great purpose. Heroes are not bad things

But, heroes - in that traditional sense of people with superpowers who swoop in to save the day or folks from the past who we memorialize by remembering only their moments of perfection - those kinds of heroes aren't the ones who really make a difference in our daily lives.

Yes, they can inspire us. Yes, they can set examples for us. But, if all we ever have are those heroes, then there is much that won't ever get done. Because we'll either be confused without them and unsure of what to do next, or we will enshrine them on mountain tops where we hide out, far away from the joys and struggles of daily life.

For many of us Jesus is a hero. But, if we watch him, he isn't *that* kind of hero. He isn't a distant presence who shows up just in the nick of time. He isn't a cape-wearing superstar who drops into the crisis, cleans it up, and disappears just as quickly.

Rather, Jesus is a hero of a different kind. He is one who shows us how to live, not in words, but in deeds. He is one who shows up and remains as long as he is needed. He is one who invites others, not just to fawn in his presence, but invites people into real relationships of give and take, of challenge and growth, of abiding love. He is one who takes on flesh and moves into our neighborhoods to experience life with us.

And even beyond that, Jesus is the hero who nurtures that tendency within each of us.

Remember last week's scripture? After the disciples had been companions in Jesus' ministry for a while, he shared his power and authority with them and sent them out to do that same ministry. And if we've read the Bible, we know that sometimes they did great things with that power and sometimes they struggled to harness it. Sometimes they got it right in amazing ways and sometimes they got it overwhelmingly wrong.

And yet Jesus never gave up on them. Rather he was a mentor-hero who continued to nurture in them the gifts that he saw, who continued to trust them to try again, and who finally entrusted them with the whole of his ministry.

See, faith isn't just about sitting in the presence of greatness. It isn't just about admiring Jesus and other heroes of the faith. It isn't just about waiting for Jesus to swoop in and make everything better. It isn't just about staying on the mountaintops.

Rather, our faith drives us down into the delights and disappointments of daily life and asks us to commit to living like Jesus.

This was true for the disciples and it is true for us. We are invited to do the same work he did and in doing so to make a difference.

We are invited to look to Jesus, to learn from him, and to shape our lives after his.

We are invited to let Jesus help us see the gifts that we have and the places in the world where our gifts meet others' needs. And then we are invited to share.

See, too often we live as if we are waiting for a divine magic wand to be waved or for Jesus to show up in a cape to save the day. But as those who claim to be followers of Jesus', we are invited not only to admire him, but to continue his work.

We are invited to look within and to discover the hero who lives inside each of us. Heroes who are willing to get their hands dirty, to take risks for what is right, to love each of God's children with fierce abandon.

Earlier this year, in anticipation of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, political historian Heather Cox Richardson wrote about heroes. She wrote, "You hear sometimes, now that we know the sordid details of the lives of some of our leading figures, that America has no heroes left.

"When I was writing a book about the Wounded Knee Massacre, where heroism was pretty thin on the ground, I gave that a lot of thought. And I came to believe that heroism is neither being perfect, nor doing something spectacular. In fact, it's just the opposite: it's regular, flawed human beings choosing to put others before themselves, even at great cost, even if no one will ever know, even as they realize the walls might be closing in around them.

"It means sitting down the night before D-Day and writing a letter praising the troops and taking all the blame for the next day's failure upon yourself in case things went wrong, as General Dwight D. Eisenhower did.

"It means writing in your diary that you 'still believe that people are really good at heart,' even while you are hiding in an attic from the men who are soon going to kill you, as Anne Frank did.

“It means signing your name to the bottom of the Declaration of Independence in bold print, even though you know you are signing your own death warrant should the British capture you, as John Hancock did.

“It means defending your people’s right to practice a religion you don’t share, even though you know you are becoming a dangerously visible target, as Sitting Bull did.

“Sometimes it just means sitting down, even when you are told to stand up, as Rosa Parks did.

“None of those people woke up one morning and said to themselves that they were about to do something heroic. It’s just that when they had to, they did what was right” (Heather Cox Richardson, Facebook post, January 19, 2025).

Movie heroes are fun and mountain top experiences have their place. But it is here in the midst of our messy, wonderful lives that real heroes become evident. It is here in the midst of our messy, wonderful lives that we have the chance to live like Jesus and to make a difference. Amen.