

“In the Dawn’s Early Light”

Text: Luke 10:1-11; 16-20

Rev. Barbara A. Frey

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In the history of our nation, ordinary persons have been called to do extraordinary work. Ordinary persons doing extraordinary work often are called heroes. What makes a Christian patriot?

In order to be an effective witness of the power and love of God, the church must be both a part of the culture and country in which it lives, without becoming part of them. Daring to love and serve both God and country with integrity was a risk that lawyer/poet Francis Scott Key was willing to take. The author of the words to our difficult-to-sing national anthem took seriously his responsibilities as both a Christian and an American.

It was in the midst of the highly unpopular War of 1812, a conflict still noted for its shabby ideology and selfish ends, that Key stepped out of obscurity and into American history. On the night bridging September 13 and 14, 1814, Key found himself sloshing about in a boat on Chesapeake Bay on a mission of benevolence. Key had volunteered to take part in a not-very optimistic prisoner exchange attempt—trading a captured British officer for the release of an aged, but highly respected American physician, Dr. William Beane. Key’s negotiating abilities were apparently quite good. He returned with Dr. Beane and “The Star Spangled Banner.” Unlike other national anthems, “The Star Spangled Banner” does not extol the glories of battle or the nobility of soldiering. Instead, it has hymn like qualities that offers up gratitude for the event of an unexpected salvation. In the national anthem, all eyes are focused on the flagstaff, hoping against hope that as dawn breaks, the light will reveal that the United States’ flag will still be flying there.

Dawn was a special time to Frances Scott Key. If you have ever experienced dawn, you know that dawn is a special time of day. Dawn is often a symbol for a new beginning, hope. Poet Richard Watson Glidden’s describes morning as the awakening and the glad surprise. At dawn the onrush of light can be intense, almost overwhelming; or it can be gentle and soothing; but it is associated with a radical expansion of awareness.

In our scripture, seventy persons face the dawning of a new day of challenges and opportunities as they pair up to go forth on the mission that Jesus is sending them. Jesus calls ordinary people to do extraordinary things—people as typical as any one of us. Their mission is to go in pairs to every town and place where Jesus intends to go, and to do the work of curing the sick, preaching the kingdom, and driving out demons. “I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves,” warns Jesus (Luke 10:3). The 70 are facing a “dug-in enemy.” Jesus orders them to carry no purse, bag or sandals, and to live off the hospitality of those who will receive them. Their only weapon is the powerful message: “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” (v.9) Jesus is calling for common people to show uncommon valor and to embark on a mission that seems unlikely to succeed.

But when these 70 ordinary persons return, they make a surprising report: “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!” (v.17) Speaking and acting in the name of Jesus, the 70 have a

power that they never imagined possible. The ordinary virtue of following Jesus suddenly turns into extraordinary heroism, and common disciples discover that they have uncommon abilities.

Speaking of ordinary persons doing extraordinary work and day-to-day heroics reminds me of a monument surrounded by American flags that I pass on my commute to First Church. The monument captures an unforgettable moment in WWII—the raising of the flag at Iwo Jima. Iwo Jima is a small island in the Pacific where the U.S. needed a landing strip for bombers striking Japan. Some 70,000 marines were sent to take it from a dug-in enemy. “The thing I’ll remember forever,” recounts Major General Fred Haynes, “was the courage and the guts of the kids. and these were young kids.” They were kids, but also heroes. (“Iwo Jima: The Flag Raisers,” www.iwojima.com/raising)

What’s most amazing is how ordinary each of these heroes was. Mike Strank played the French horn and once slugged a baseball out of Points Stadium in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. Harlon Block was an outgoing daredevil with many friends at Welasco High School in Texas. Franklin Sousley was a red-haired, freckle-faced kid raised on a tobacco farm in Kentucky. Ira Hayes was a Pima Indian from Arizona who was told by his chief to be an “Honorable Warrior” and bring honor upon his family. Rene Gagnon was just a kid from Manchester, NH, who ended up being the youngest of the survivors. And John Bradley was a Navy Corpsman from Wisconsin who “just jumped in to lend a hand.” So ordinary, but so heroic. (“Remembering Six heroes at Iwo Jima,” www.cbsnews.com)

God is always looking for heroes, for people willing to accept the challenge of following Christ. This is never easy, but our church and our nation can use a few more heroes. Now, more than ever, we need ordinary people to do the extraordinary work of love and compassion, of healing and hope in a world being torn apart by hatred and self-interest.

In the 80’s when I was teaching high school in New Haven, a new movement called Random Acts of Kindness emerged and our students were encouraged to get involved. Some years later, a movie called “Pay It Forward” caused a stir. A young boy, Ryan Hyde, was challenged to create a social studies project. His teacher called his project an overutopian idea. Ryan’s idea was that he would help three people and then each of those three would help three more and so on. The first person he helped was a homeless man. The amazing thing is that Ryan’s idea worked. This whole concept of asking that a good deed be repaid by having it done to others sounds a lot like what Jesus might ask us to do. On the internet I found a story of a Vancouver bicyclist who believes in creating a culture of kindness as a solution to all the challenges in our culture. He has cycled along an 18,000 mile route, arranging presentations to school children on bullying and kindness. He called his last tour—“Kindness, Cycle It Forward.” Ryan and this cyclist as well as many others, are typical persons who did the extraordinary work of love and compassion, of healing and hope in a world being torn apart by hatred and self-interest.

There’s nothing idealistic about this, and in fact the proclamation of God’s kingdom involves more than mere words—it always includes clear and concrete action. At this time of Independence Day celebrations, we would do well to remember that kingdom-building actions have been performed by both our church and our nation throughout history.

God’s heroes are going to be found right here,

- found among men and women and children who respond to the call of Christ,

- found among ordinary people willing to take risks and do extraordinary work,
- found among persons able to proclaim the kingdom of heaven and extend God’s love and compassion to others,
- found among people who depend more on divine authority than on human ability,
- found among people who rejoice more in God’s acceptance than in worldly recognition.

It’s up to us to be these kinds of heroes, and to make our mark. Today as we face the dawning of a new day of challenges and opportunities, what will we be able to see in the first glimpses of that light? If we are content to focus only on the flag pole, we might not notice some of the destruction that has occurred around it. Will we notice????

- the pollution staining the land and the waters
- the appalling number of homeless men and women
- the problems caused by addictions
- prejudices of race, gender, or sexual preference
- the various needs and cries of our brothers and sisters

We, as the church, can help the light that dawns on all this and more, to be intense and bright and strong enough to make a difference. We, as the church, are called to boldly speak the word of God to the country we love. Because we walk with Jesus, our role model of love and compassion, of justice and peace, of hope and trust, we are as Langston Hughes titled his poem, “Walkers With the Dawn.” Here it is: with a minor editing---- when you here the word “sun,” think “Son” meaning Jesus.

Being walkers with the dawn and morning,
 Walkers with the sun and morning,
 We are not afraid of night,
 Nor days of gloom,
 Nor darkness—
 Being walkers with the sun and morning.

Almighty God, grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil, and to make no peace with oppression, and that we may reverently use our freedom. Help us to employ our freedom in the maintenance of justice among all persons and nations to the glory of thy holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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