



Liturgical Day: The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: August 28, 2005

Sermon Title: Hero to Zero

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

In our home, the Disney animated movie Hercules was a hit for months and months. It still gets played now and again, but not like it used to. We rarely went a day without watching the movie, reading one of the Hercules books, or seeing our kids act out a favorite scene or two. One of my favorite components of that movie was the wonderful Greek chorus that provided background to many of the scenes. Sounding much like a black Baptist choir, these toga-clad women were great at interpreting the story for us.

In this movie, Hercules appears as an awkward teenager with super powers, and gets off to a slow start, but as he wins a few battles over evil opponents, gains the favor of the local crowd, and starts to become a real hero in their eyes, the Greek chorus sings a rousing version of "Zero to Hero."

Reading this morning's Gospel lesson, I found myself wishing that the Greek chorus had been here to accompany my reading. But I would have had them turn the song around, and sing "Hero to Zero" because that's what happens to Saint Peter in today's lesson.

If you remember last week, Peter definitely comes off as a hero. Jesus is asking the disciples what people are saying about him – what the disciples themselves are thinking about him – and it is Peter who offers up the truth for the first time in Matthew's Gospel: "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." Peter is the hero. So much so that Jesus declares it is on this confession of Peter that the whole future of the church will be built.

This week, Peter's fortunes are completely reversed. Last week Peter declared that Jesus is the Messiah; this week Peter objects to Jesus' interpretation of what Messiah means. Last week, Jesus described him as the rock on which the church will be built; this week, Jesus refers to him as Satan. As far as Peter is concerned, it is definitely "Hero to Zero."

This week's Gospel lesson is one of the more important texts in Matthew. In every one of the gospel accounts there is a point at which the ministry of Jesus takes a new direction. It's the moment when it becomes clear that Jesus' ministry will lead him to the cross – and the intensity from that point on in the story is very different from what precedes it.

This exchange with Peter is that pivotal moment in Matthew's Gospel. From this point on nothing will deter Jesus from fulfilling his understanding of his call to be Messiah. The problem is that his understanding of fulfilling that call is very different than what Peter and the others expected.

That's why Peter doesn't get it. He has his own vision of what it means to be the Messiah. It has to do with power and honor and victory and glory. But for Jesus, it has to do with suffering and dying and giving life that others might live. Peter's vision is rooted in what any reasonable human might have wanted for Jesus. Jesus' vision is rooted in what God wants for the world – and there is a tremendous difference between the two.

That's true when it comes to talking about the Messiah. And as this lesson also points out, it's true when it comes to talking about following Jesus the

FIRST LESSON
JEREMIAH 15:15-21

PSALM
PSALM 26:1-8

SECOND LESSON
ROMANS 12:9-21

GOSPEL LESSON
ST. MATTHEW 16:21-28

PRAYER OF THE DAY
O GOD, WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR SON WHO CHOSE THE PATH OF SUFFERING FOR THE SAKE OF THE WORLD. HUMBLE US BY HIS EXAMPLE, POINT US TO THE PATH OF OBEDIENCE, AND GIVE US STRENGTH TO FOLLOW HIS COMMANDS; THROUGH YOUR SON, JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD. AMEN.

**9300 E. BELLEVUE AVE.
GREENWOOD VILLAGE,
COLORADO 80111**

VOICE
(303) 770-9300

FAX
(303) 770-9301

WEB
WWW.STPLC.ORG

Messiah. Jesus rebukes Peter because Peter is more concerned with human things than with divine things. Then he closes the deal with this declaration: *For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.* Of all the sayings attributed to Jesus, this is one of the toughest for me. It is tough for me because I am one who often finds himself thinking about human things rather than divine things.

I love my life. I have a wonderful family I have a great job. I live in a terrific community. I have a few hobbies that I really enjoy. I'm a believer that life ought to be cherished – and I do my best to appreciate it, and to do whatever I can to make my life better. That's the American way, and much as I like to imagine myself as keeping that influence at arm's length, this morning's Gospel lesson doesn't let me off the hook quite that easily.

This morning Jesus teaches us that it is only by devaluing our lives, and living for others, that we can know the kind of life he wants for us. It's only by reaching out and giving life to others that we finally experience what life is really all about. When I'm thinking about a family vacation in Mazatlán, Jesus gets my attention with visions of a service trip to Juarez. When I'm thinking about renting a condominium in Vail, Jesus gets my attention with an invitation to be more involved with Lutheran Refugee Services. When I am thinking about joining another fishing or bluegrass association, Jesus gets my attention by calling me to become more supportive of Selian Lutheran Hospital in Tanzania.

He's right, of course. I've often professed (if less often acted on my profession) that no individual or organization has much of a life at all unless they discover a purpose outside of themselves. A life turned in on itself leads to possessiveness, jealousy, and misery. A life turned outward, seeking to touch the lives of others, leads to generosity, peace, and delight. The beauty of Peter's story is that he eventually gets it. He may go from Hero to Zero in the lessons we read this month, but the story of his life teaches us that the day comes when he realizes Jesus is right. Peter experiences what it means to give of himself for others. He finally receives the kind of life that Jesus wanted him to know.

A Pastor I know tells a story about Edmond -- an angry man. He is so angry that his friends and his family no longer want to spend time with him. The situation is simply this: A number of years ago his mother died. For two and a half years after that his father had been quite feeble. During that time, his aunt (with her husband), had been taking care of his father faithfully. Two to three months ago his father changed his will leaving the bulk of his estate, which is considerable, not to his son but to his sister and her husband, and the son feels slighted. He is furious. He is convinced that the estate, at least the lion's share, ought to go to him. After all, that's the way it was when his mother was alive. The fact that he is a successful professional, the fact that he has many personal assets, the fact that he lives in a community quite distant from his father and could only check in on his father occasionally, combined with the fact that his aunt and her husband look in on his father daily and are actually quite poor – all of those facts are lost to him in the righteous indignation of the injustice done to him, and the worst of it is that this once kind man, this once gracious man, this once thoughtful, jovial man is losing himself to a bitter, cynical, greedy, and ugly self.

The man in this story is dying by trying to grab onto the things of this life, by trying to claim that which he thought was once his, but is no longer his. He is losing himself. He is mortgaging the best of who he is for the things of this life.

The pastor who tells this story ends it by saying: "The difference faith makes is life itself." ¹

Jesus teaches us, today, what life is all about. He helps us to discover that if we want a life that is rich in meaning and purpose, it won't come from grabbing for all we can get. Instead, it comes from caring enough about others to give of ourselves – to give of our lives – for them. Life is filled with opportunities to do just that. Buy a ticket to the September 8 show and offer your support to the

transforming ministry that is taking place through Lutheran Refugee Services here in Denver and Selian Lutheran Hospital in Tanzania. Or better yet: find ten others who will buy tickets from you and attend. Commit yourselves to grow in the financial support you give to this congregation, and know that your gifts make life-changing ministry possible through what we do. Get to know your friends and neighbors, and care enough for those who don't know Jesus Christ to share your faith with them.

There are countless ways to give of ourselves to others. Each of them is an invitation, from Jesus, into a life that is filled with meaning and purpose. That's what Jesus wanted for Peter. That's what Jesus wants for you and me. May we discover that today. And may God bless us and enrich us with true life, through our service to others. Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (September 5, 2005)

English Text: ⁱⁱ

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." ⁱⁱⁱ

Greek Text:

Ἀπὸ τότε ἤρξατο ὁ Ἰησοῦς δεικνύειν τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ ὅτι δεῖ αὐτὸν εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα ἀπελθεῖν καὶ πολλὰ παθεῖν ἀπὸ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων καὶ ἀρχιερέων καὶ γραμματέων καὶ ἀποκτανθῆναι καὶ τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ ἐγερθῆναι. καὶ προσλαβόμενος αὐτὸν ὁ Πέτρος ἤρξατο ἐπιτιμαῖν αὐτῷ λέγων· ἴλεως σοι, κύριε· οὐ μὴ ἔσται σοι τοῦτο. ὁ δὲ στραφεὶς εἶπεν τῷ Πέτρῳ· ὕπαγε ὀπίσω μου, σαταναῖ· σκάνδαλον εἶ ἐμοῦ, ὅτι οὐ φρονεῖς τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ ἀλλὰ τὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων.

Τότε ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ· εἰ τις θέλει ὀπίσω μου ἐλθεῖν, ἀπαρνησάσθω ἑαυτὸν καὶ ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀκολουθείτω μοι. ὃς γὰρ ἐὰν θέλῃ τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ σῶσαι ἀπολέσει αὐτήν· ὃς δ' ἂν ἀπολέσῃ τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ εὐρήσει αὐτήν. τί γὰρ ὠφελήθησεται ἄνθρωπος ἐὰν τὸν κόσμον ὅλον κερδήσῃ τὴν δὲ ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ζημιωθῇ; ἢ τί δώσει ἄνθρωπος ἀντάλλαγμα τῆς ψυχῆς αὐτοῦ;

μέλλει γὰρ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐρχεσθαι ἐν τῇ δόξῃ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ μετὰ τῶν ἀγγέλων αὐτοῦ, καὶ τότε ἀποδώσει ἐκάστῳ κατὰ τὴν πράξιν αὐτοῦ. ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι εἰσὶν τινες τῶν ὧδε ἐστώτων οἵτινες οὐ μὴ γεύσονται θανάτου ἕως ἂν ἴδωσιν τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐρχόμενον ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ αὐτοῦ. ^{iv}

ⁱ This illustration is taken from "The Game Of Life: To Tell The Truth" a sermon by Mike Foss in a series entitled "The Difference Faith Makes" – preached on September 1, 2002.

ⁱⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Matthew 16:21-28, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

^{iv} St. Matthew 16:21-28, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart). To display the Greek text correctly, choose Palatino Linotype font.