

SERMON TITLE: "Give Thanks for Heroes"
SERMON TEXT: Hebrews 11:29-40
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: November 17, 2019, at First UMC (Wahlen Vets Home Day)

INTRODUCTION

The Standard Examiner went all out in honoring veterans this past week—especially our most elderly ones. On Monday, the front page featured an Ogden area veteran who was 102 years old. On Tuesday, the newspaper featured veterans who were residents of Avamere Mountain Ridge Assisted Living. The person getting the highest honors that day was 100-year-old Darral Allen. Sitting beside him, at the young age of 92, was our very own First UMC member Mel Walker, who came of age just in time to be drafted at the tail end of WW2. Then, on Thursday, the George E. Wahlen Veterans Home made the front page of the newspaper, as those residents were honored with a school group's musical presentation.

This extended celebration of Veterans Day helps instill in all of us a sense of pride and appreciation for those men and women who once served in our nation's military. But we all know that heroes don't have to be elderly, and they aren't limited to the military. Sometimes our heroes are teachers who inspire us to learn. Sometimes they're police or firefighters who protect our cities. Sometimes our heroes are peace activists or social leaders who have led our nation and world through great controversy to change policies and laws for the better. Sometimes our heroes are less-flamboyant, but very precious family members and community role models who have taught us by their words and their examples what it means to stand up for what is right and to sacrifice personal gain for a greater good.

Because heroes are present and needed in every era and culture, the Bible also celebrates and honors some heroic characters. I invite you to look with me at Hebrews chapter 11 and its descriptions of valiant persons. Let's see here some reasons why we should and can give thanks for heroes.

1—HEROES ARE PEOPLE OF FAITH

A first reason we can give thanks for heroes is that heroes are people of faith. Obviously, the long list in Hebrews 11 that includes Noah, Abraham, and Moses assumes that these persons were believers in God who ordered their lives in accordance with what they believed to be God's will. The word *faith* appears 24 times in this chapter. As Hebrews 11:11 says about Abraham and Sarah, these heroes of old were able to live with courage and determination because they trusted in the faithfulness of God. They believed that, if they stayed true to God, then God's promises would be fulfilled.

We certainly can give thanks to God that our heroes have had this kind of faith. This "assurance of things hoped for" has given our heroes tremendous boldness to stand up for their convictions, to speak truth to power, and to live with honesty and integrity in spite of how other people and difficult circumstances might block their path.

One summer when I was in high school, my pastor's niece came to my hometown to be our youth director for the summer. Melody Clapp was a religion major at a church college. She was studying to become a minister. Back in the 1970s, Melody was a very rare role model of a female planning to enter the ordained ministry. Only years later, when I was entering ministry myself, did I gain any real understanding of the odds that Melody faced. No doubt she was told by many that ministry was no place for a woman. But Melody was a person of strong faith, and she believed that God had called her. So she bravely pressed forward. Unfortunately, Melody died in a car accident before she reached the fulfillment of her dreams. But she certainly was instrumental in showing me something that God might do through me. Melody was one of my heroes. And I thank God for her faith.

Maybe you have a hero like that in your life—a distinctly religious or saintly person who had "the assurance of things hoped for"—someone who lived by the boldness of God's promises. If so, I'm sure you're grateful for their courageous example of faith. I would dare say, however, that even heroes who aren't religious in the traditional sense could be considered heroes who have some kind of faith.

They possess an assurance that something good will result from their efforts. Whether this sense of confidence comes from nature or nurture, they believe that they can make a positive difference in their world. And, so, they act. They rescue someone from a fire. They defuse a bomb. They feed the hungry. They read a book to a child. They seek legislative changes. I'm sure heroes, like all the rest of us, have their bad days when they wonder if their trouble and sacrifice is worth the effort. But what keeps heroes going is that, through it all, they believe that what they do makes a difference. In that sense, they are people of faith. And for that faith of our heroes, we give thanks.

2—HEROES ARE WILLING TO SUFFER

A second reason we can give thanks for our heroes is that they are willing to suffer for their expected outcomes. It's not that we want people to suffer for suffering's sake or that we want them to take unnecessary or foolish risks. But we know that few important things happen in life without some kind of effort, stress, conflict, or danger. At the very least, our heroes delay their own gratification. They put off their own comforts and rewards in order to make a positive impact for others. And, sometimes, our heroes make the ultimate sacrifice in giving their life for their cause.

In verses 33 through 38, Hebrews 11 talks about ancient biblical heroes who faced lions, fire, and war. They were mocked, flogged, and imprisoned. Some of them survived those ordeals. Others were stoned to death, sawn in two, or killed with the sword.

Heroes we know about in more-recent times have suffered similar indignities. For example, in a Colorado school shooting in May, a student named Kendrick Castillo charged and fought against one of the gunmen. Kendrick's heroic sacrifice of his own life was what gave Kendrick's friend Brendan and another student the opportunity then to disarm and pin the gunman to the floor, preventing him from shooting and killing any more. Fortunately, Brendan and the other student survived the ordeal. But, no doubt, those brave young men are still suffering today from the trauma of that violent and deadly assault on their Highlands Ranch school.

While we should rarely wish suffering upon anyone, and we should do everything in our power to prevent the likelihood of such horrors in our society, we can be glad when the sacrifices of our heroes reduce harm, promote justice, and produce a positive outcome. For those reasons we can certainly thank God that our heroes are willing to suffer.

3—HEROES ARE DEPENDENT ON US

There's a third point about heroes that comes through in Hebrews 11. We should thank God that our heroes are dependent on us. Did you hear that, in verses 39 and 40? Hebrews says, "yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect." In other words, the ancient and more-recent heroes are incomplete by themselves. Their tasks are not yet finished, and their valiant efforts are calling us to join in. The heroes who have come before us need us to step up and become heroes too.

So why is that a reason to be thankful? Wouldn't it be a lot easier if we declared that the faithful and brave had already solved all the difficult problems? Then we could just go home and put up our feet in front of the television. Who wants to admit that there's still work to do? Wouldn't that require us to commit to a cause of suffering also? And wouldn't it be frustrating for us to labor in an effort that probably won't be made perfect in our lifetime either?

Well, well. Do we hear ourselves? We want heroes who are faithful and willing to suffer, but we aren't willing to receive and carry the baton? The truth is, we must. We owe it to those who have gone before us not to let their hard-earned progress slip away. Whether we're talking about national security and independence, ethnic and gender equality, freedom of worship, or any other kind of reasonable right or important cause, the heroic task is never finished. Perfection is always yet ahead. The heroes of the past are dependent on us, as we will be dependent on our children and grandchildren to keep working on the heroic projects that we won't be able to complete. I guess that's where

inspiration, calling, and life purpose come in. We catch it from our predecessors, and hopefully we pass it along to our successors. Such connectedness is an important feature in the preservation and improvement of our human species and the environment in which we live. To me that seems like a pretty good reason to thank God that our heroes are dependent on us.

CONCLUSION

On Veterans Day, my husband and I went to see the movie *Harriet*. Wow! What a story! Sure, somewhere in the past I'd heard that Harriet Tubman helped free slaves through the Underground Railroad. But that was the extent of my rusty knowledge. The movie showed what an amazing woman Harriet Tubman was. She was so capable, so full of faith in God, and so determined to have freedom for herself and to provide that freedom for others. She risked her life on 13 missions, and is credited with rescuing about 70 people. If you haven't yet seen the movie, I highly recommend it, as a mostly-true depiction of a real American hero. It's a story not only of a great person of the past, but a story that encourages and inspires us to continue carrying on such heroic acts of justice and liberation today.

As Hebrews 11 tells us, our heroes are people of faith who believe that God has given them not only an important task but also the ability to make a positive difference. Our heroes are willing to suffer, if necessary, to get the job done. And our heroes are dependent on us to continue the mission. So, in this season of Thanksgiving, let's be sure and give thanks for heroes.