

Tina Had it Wrong

Luke 10:1-11

Ypsilanti First United Methodist Church

July 6, 2008

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A few years ago, singer Tina Turner topped the charts with a song called "We Don't Need Another Hero." The lyrics included the following words:

Looking for something
We can rely on
There's gotta be something better out there
Love and compassion
Their day is coming
All else are castles built in the air
And I wonder when we are ever gonna change
Living under the fear till nothing else remains
All the children say
We don't need another hero
We don't need to know the way home

Tina is right: we are searching for something we can rely on. And we ache to find "something better out there." But when she claims "We don't need another hero /We don't need to know the way home," her argument falls apart. For the truth is that Tina had it wrong. What we really need are more heroes, now more than ever.

Our gospel lesson this Independence day weekend, finds Jesus calling on ordinary people to do extraordinary things. He appoints 70 average people - 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.

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).

Is this going to work? It doesn't seem so at first. 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 souls 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.

Do we need another hero? Absolutely. And the truth is that we don't have to look far to find examples of ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

Two weeks ago, Morris Taber sent me an e-mail which contained the story of extraordinary things that ordinary United Methodists in Florida have been able to accomplish. Tomato pickers in the state of Florida work in harsh and unjust conditions and for very low wages. Last November, thousands of people of faith brought more than 85,000 petitions to Burger King headquarters, one of the parent companies of these tomato pickers. The march started with a prayer breakfast hosted by First United Methodist Church, Miami. On May 23rd, an agreement was signed between the Burger King Corporation and the Coalition of Tomato Workers, and Burger King agreed to pay an extra 1.5 cents per pound for tomatoes picked in Florida and used in their restaurants. This agreement doubles the wages of the Florida tomato workers, and it also offers protection to the workers who have been subjected to abuse from growers.

Many advocates for the tomato pickers are young people, who believe this is what one who calls themselves Christian should do, taking really seriously Jesus' call to take care of those who don't have their own voices.¹

These are the kind of heroes Jesus was calling for when he sent out the 70 disciples. These are the kinds of actions, Jesus asks us to take with our faith.

The truth is that amazing things will happen when we step out in faith on a mission from God. God is always looking for people like you and me willing to accept the challenge of following Christ. Now, more than ever, we need ordinary people to do the extraordinary work of love and compassion in a world being torn apart by fear, hatred and self-interest.

Most heroes are made, not by great acts of valor, but rather by seemingly small actions of compassion, kindness and love.

Last week, Joy Stair gave me a wonderful book called **Three Cups of Tea**. If you read one book this summer, I suggest this one. It an amazing story of what one person can do to change the world.

The book is about Greg Mortensen, a mountain climber who gets lost on a climb in the high peaks of the Himalaya's. He ends up in a small mountain village in the Northern part of Pakistan. This is the land of the Taliban and Al Queda, and is also one of the many places in our world where children have no school to go to. In this remote village Greg Mortensen discovers that the children go to school outdoors, literally on the side of a cliff, and they don't even have pencils. They write their lessons with sticks in the dirt. And most of the girls are not in school at all. Back in 1994, when Greg Mortensen saw this, his heart was moved with compassion and love and he promised the village leaders that he would build them a school.

He returned to the U.S. and raised twelve thousand dollars, then returned to Pakistan to build the school. But in the process, he discovered many other villages in this part of the world also in need of schools, so over the next decade, he built not one, but 55 schools. Greg has some major donors backing his work, but a large portion of the money has come from school children in the U.S. through a program called Pennies for Peace. In this program school children donate pennies and pencils and since 1994 they have raised eight million pennies. Something heroic can be done with pennies, given by ordinary kids—only these pennies make an extraordinary difference.

Greg Mortensen says that more than 145 million of the world's children are deprived of education due to poverty, exploitation, slavery, gender discrimination, religious extremists, and corrupt governments. Mortensen says that what motivates him to keep building schools is simple. "when I look into the eyes of the children of Pakistan and Afghanistan, I see the eyes of my own children--full of wonder--and then I hope that we each do our part to leave them a legacy of peace instead of the perpetual cycle of violence, war, terrorism, racism, exploitation and bigotry that we have yet to conquer." (Three Cups of Tea p. 335)

Mortensen also points out that many of those persons who join the Taliban and other such groups, are recruited through fundamentalist schools called Madrassas. Mortensen believes that by building secular schools and helping to promote education- particularly for girls- in the world's most volatile war zones, support for the Taliban and other

extremist sects will eventually dry up. It is his way of promoting world peace... one school at a time.

Greg Mortensen is an ordinary person, who has done some extraordinary things—all because he decided to do something about the injustices he saw.

Mortensen put his words into actions in Pakistan and Afghanistan, much the same way as the as our church members Curtis and Jeanette Bartz have done building the school in northern Haiti and Morris and Ann Taber have done with the primary school and library in Zimbabwe. Much the same way as the Florida United Methodists have done with the tomato workers and many others in our congregation do in our community. Ordinary people doing extraordinary things. This is what Jesus was calling for with the 70 he sent out, and the disciples he calls on today.

God's heroes are going to be found right here, if they are going to be found anywhere at all. Found among men and women who respond to the call of Christ. Found among ordinary people willing to take risks and do extraordinary work. Found among folks 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, and who rejoice more in God's acceptance than in worldly recognition.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa says "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." (as quoted in The Lutheran, August 2000, 4.)

In her hit song, Tina had it wrong. We need heroes. Today more than ever. And God is calling each of us, ordinary folks, to do extraordinary things in Christ's name. Amen.

ⁱ (Kathy Gilbert, United Methodist News Service, Nashville.)