

## ***The Heart of Selflessness***

Acts 7:54-60

Memorial Day, as we know, is the time to remember the heroes of our nation, most typically those who have lost their lives in war or serving society in some other profession or public role (e.g., fire, police, etc.). Tomorrow many of us will line the streets of this village while veterans, high school bands, and dignitaries parade through town in Noank's idiosyncratic slice of Americana. We will follow the procession to the cemetery for the annual ritual of remembrance. It's both charming and meaningful as citizens of this country and as residents of this seaside hamlet.

Most Noankers view it as a solemn time to extol those who have paid the "ultimate price" and made the "supreme sacrifice" for the sake of humanity, or for freedom's cause, or in defense of one's country and family. For many of us, it's the only time we visit the local cemetery which is the resting place for villagers and ancestors who have died over the past two centuries at home, on the seas, or in our nation's wars. With pomp, parades, and military veterans wearing their dress uniforms, it is a holiday, perhaps more than Independence Day itself that defines our sense of national pride. In de Toqueville terms, honoring the heroes of war demonstrates the *amour propre* (or "self-regard" or "-respect") of American democracy, though it's not limited to our particular experience, of course. In lands well beyond our borders, the silence of the dead gives voice to national anthems and patriotic dreams. By remembering and honoring those who have died, it makes their

sacrifice sacred and meaningful for protecting, if not saving, the lives of others.

Heroism is one of the most treasured and virtuous ideals for humankind. From ancient myths to our modern media, the heroic ideal is revered and embraced. It's not always the larger-than-life figures of history who are regarded as heroic; common people can be placed upon the pedestal of immortality by offering up their lives for another. Average, ordinary people can stand out among equals as an example of noble selflessness.

In many ways and on many fronts, we live in a culture of hero-worshippers, from Hollywood to the halls of Congress to our hometowns. If a person rises above the rest, if one gives up his or her life for another, if one dies as a martyr for a noble cause, their lives become distinguished and worthy of veneration for posterity.

I suppose we revere such selfless heroism because it seems so unusual; it tends to run counter to the individualism and self-interest that seem to be more characteristic of people. When heroism is displayed in moments of great crisis and stress—those times when natural survival instincts usually take over—to put one's life on the line and make such a personal sacrifice for others seems uncommon and exceptionally brave and noble. We're surprised, if not amazed, by such displays of selflessness, much like journalist and author, Christopher McDougall, who wryly notes the oddity of heroic altruism:

Even Charles Darwin, that human decoder ring of bizarre behavior, found the idea of saving a stranger's life to be a total head-scratcher. ...Extreme heroism springs from something that no scientific theory can fully explain; it's an illogical impulse that flies in the face of biology, psychology, actuarial statistics, and basic common sense.

I don't think he's being overly cynical. Most people react in a crisis with the impulse to flee danger, not to take it on; they become overwhelmed and prefer to be saved than to be a savior. Those reactions are natural, but also are drilled into us by those who want to protect us and constantly worry about our welfare (e.g., "don't do anything foolish"; "don't try to be a hero"). As a rule, we expect people to use common sense to protect themselves from harm—to avoid situations that will put their lives in peril. Self-interest and protective measures usually take over and playing the hero seems like fool's play, as if you're breaking the basic rules of life.

That said, even though fleeing danger may be more instinctive to us for our personal welfare, at the same time, heroism is precisely what we need for our collective survival, and perhaps, within many of us, it's also a yearning to be satisfied. I think one of the reasons we admire displays of selflessness and heroism is because we know that making sacrifices for others is necessary for everyone's best welfare, and it also is what strengthens our spiritual self-esteem and purpose in life. Selflessness and altruism are ways in which we can go the extra mile in expressing love and care for other people, especially for those who are beyond the ones closest to our hearts. It wouldn't be remarkable to expect anyone of us to lay down our life for someone we love and are related to; but it would be noteworthy if we did the same for those we don't know and, in particular, those with whom we feel no particular love or concern. That's where the nobility of heroism comes in which is impressive, compelling, and inspiring—the type we honor publicly and privately.

A good example of this came to my attention last week with the opening of the 9-11 museum at the site of the Twin Towers. In the museum, I'm told, is a red bandana, contributed by the mother of Welles Crowther, a 24-year-old former volunteer firefighter who was employed by a financial services firm located in the South Tower, which was struck by the second plane. President Obama recounted his story at the opening ceremony:

In those awful moments after the South Tower was hit, some of the injured huddled in the wreckage of the 78th floor. The fires were spreading. The air was filled with smoke. It was dark, and they could barely see. It seemed as if there was no way out.

And then there came a voice -- clear, calm, saying he had found the stairs. A young man in his 20s, strong, emerged from the smoke, and over his nose and his mouth he wore a red handkerchief.

He called for fire extinguishers to fight back the flames. He tended to the wounded. He led those survivors down the stairs to safety, and carried a woman on his shoulders down 17 flights. Then he went back.

Back up all those flights. Then back down again, bringing more wounded to safety. Until that moment when the tower fell.

They didn't know his name. They didn't know where he came from. But they knew their lives had been saved by the man in the red bandana. <sup>1</sup>

Welles Crowther's heroism was repeated by hundreds of others throughout that day—those who stepped up in the moment and acted selflessly. What's often overlooked is that this kind of phenomenal bravery isn't as dependent on a specific set of skills (though, certainly, skills do help); but it comes first from the ability to be *empathetic*—the type of caring that quickly identifies with the suffering of others and rises to the occasion when it's called for.

Social psychologists refer to altruism as *pro-social* behavior—actions which benefit others and promote the welfare of one's social environment. Neurobiologists believe humans are actually hardwired

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)

to do this, especially since the “pleasure centers”<sup>2</sup> of the brain light up when people act selflessly. This explains why we often feel good about helping others. The reward we receive is a sense of satisfaction and inspiration. It’s a significant health benefit, mentally and physically, enough that those suffering from depression are often encouraged to go out and do something for someone else, because it contributes to altering the brain’s chemistry resulting in a more positive outlook. Some have even theorized that the heart of selflessness is this biochemical process that releases endorphins and dopamine within our brains, i.e., that altruism is chemically induced.

As a matter of faith, however, going the extra mile in service to others is a matter of calibrating our moral compass. It lies at the heart of what we are led to do by Christ’s example and teachings. To act selflessly is not merely a religious commandment (e.g., love your neighbor as yourself), it serves to balance us spiritually from a preoccupation with ourselves—an egocentricity that complicates social relations and formation. The heart of selflessness, then, may be what we cultivate and strengthen within us by continual acts of empathetic caring. It’s a moral reflex we can condition within us habitually when we are accustomed to helping others; when it’s a conditioned moral reflex, we will more likely act selflessly when it’s called for in the moment under stress. We train ourselves to do this

---

<sup>2</sup> *There are systems in the brain that have been developed to provide the feelings of happiness and pleasure—including the pleasure centers in the Ventral Tegmentum (VT), the Nucleus Accumbens (NA), and the Medial Prefrontal Cortex, which we call the Prefrontal Pleasure Center (PPC). These centers provide the connections to cells that secrete brain chemicals including dopamine and the endorphins, which are strongly associated with these positive feelings. All of the psychological approaches to enhancing pleasure indirectly affect these pleasure centers to increase their production of these mood enhancers.* (Jonathan Cowan, Ph.D. and John Starman, M.A., “Understanding and Activating Your Brain’s Pleasure Centers”, [www.peakachievement.goodbarry.com/UABC.pdf](http://www.peakachievement.goodbarry.com/UABC.pdf))

by creating a habit of helping others—being considerate and empathetic of them in their time of need. Those whose hearts are oriented toward helping others are more likely to do so when called upon. This helps make an ordinary person extraordinary when the situation requires it.

At this point, it would be easy to conclude that this exemplifies the Christian ideal of service and love, i.e., to be as selfless and self-giving as Christ himself. That's true to a certain extent. However, I think the heart of selflessness for a Christian asks even more of us than simply acting out of a natural desire or motivated by the benefits from being altruistic. Why I say this is due in part to our Scripture this morning. This story from Acts takes us to another level—one that is truly exceptional and counterintuitive—suggesting something else may be involved in carrying out a truly heroic and selfless act of Christlikeness.

This brief lectionary text out of a longer passage depicting the earliest witness of Stephen culminates in something very few people would ever want to do, i.e., have empathy and compassion, and forgiveness, for one's enemies! In theory, many of us would think we could meet the demands of this ethic. Perhaps, some of us could. Most, though, would fall short in the moment, especially under duress. You see, expressing self-giving love for the very ones perpetrating and orchestrating the harm we suffer is not only counterintuitive, it requires a level of empathy we might not be willing to express or embrace. Let me explain.

In this story, Stephen's life ends no less gory than Jesus' did on the cross. He was taken by (what amounts to) a lynch mob, who then

pummeled him with rocks and stones resulting in his death, mainly because they took offense at what he said. I'd be horrified if I witnessed this. Aside from the injustice, stoning a person to death is a gruesome, cruel punishment. Yet, rather than crying out for justice, instead of calling for divine retribution upon his murderers, like Jesus, Stephen prayed that his attackers, his true enemies, would not be held liable for what they were doing. Answering such a heinous crime with forgiveness asks a great deal of even the most gracious, gentle heart.

I, like you, would hope I could do that, but I recognize in my own heart, I may not be all that well prepared. I so recoil at injustice and cruelty, I'm not sure I could be magnanimous and gracious to murderers in the moment. That's why it requires a different level of spiritual consciousness and a more profound sense of selflessness to meet this standard. This is not something we're naturally inclined to do. However, just like others acts of altruism, we can cultivate such grace if we are accustomed to forgiving people, particularly those whom we have every reason not to show mercy.

Loving one's enemies is the least natural impulse any human being has; this level of selflessness—to sacrifice the need for justice and to forgive cruelty—requires a measure of spiritual discipline and prayerful conditioning that can be deliberately and mindfully called upon and carried through in the moment. It means viewing the perpetrator differently than as the embodiment of evil and as a source of terror and violence. Every instinct in one's being—of fear, of survival, of protection and security, of fairness and justice—will rise up and challenge any desire for forgiveness and mercy. Every ounce

of patriotic zeal will mount a campaign against it. Every protective reflex to defend a victim will test it.

Loving one's enemies doesn't mean simply lying there and taking abuse, but it does call us not to demonize our adversaries. Showing them mercy will, by nature, be one of the hardest things we will ever do in life and it will receive marginal support from most people. For that reason, one must prepare one's heart to forgive enemies—to show mercy to those we can justifiably hate—to continually do good to those who harm us.

When a person can love his or her greatest enemy, then that is approaching the true heart of selflessness. In the Christian tradition, following the examples of Jesus and Stephen and, I suppose, most if not all of the Apostles and then some, loving our enemies is the quintessential Christian ethic. What makes it doubly challenging is that few people will applaud you or erect statues to your honor, as long as those enemies remain theirs as well. No war memorials have been dedicated to loving the enemy. This Christlike standard will be hotly debated even by Christians. Loving one's enemies is the ultimate sacrificial act of Christianity. Yet, for me, this is the genuine heart of selflessness.

It's good for us to be mindful of this so that we do not equate heroism on the field of battle (which we honor on this Memorial Day weekend) with the standards of selflessness of Christ. Both are noble and honorable, but they are not the same, nor do they have to be. The Christian faith calls us as followers to a higher standard of selflessness—to a measure of morality that exceeds even what conventional notions of heroism consider noble. To be selfless in any

way is honorable and righteous, to be sure, but the admirers and supporters will be fewer for those who take it as far as Christ. I would submit, this is part of the sacrifice any of us makes in order to follow Jesus' way: we do it not just to feel good about ourselves, or to receive the approval and acclaim of others, but because we value the life of others—even that of our cruelest enemies—more than our own.

This Christlike spirit of selflessness is startlingly rare, but it's immeasurably important for the survival of the human race. It's a calling we have as followers of the Prince of Peace. But it's also a hope we should have as citizens of this great nation and as people of good will, who no longer wish to count and to bury the casualties of war.

May we bless the memory of those who have died—our friends and our enemies alike.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes  
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT  
25 May 2014