



# First United Church of Oak Park

## Heroes Love Thy Neighbor

Luke 10:25-37

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What does a hero look like? How can you tell if someone is a hero?

It's easier to spot a *superhero*. They don a uniform of some kind, often an emblem or iconic item that makes them easily identifiable. Think of a superhero...who comes to mind?

Batman was my favorite superhero growing up, but maybe Wonder Woman and her lasso popped into your head, or Spiderman and his webs, Captain America in red and blue, Thor and his hammer, Superman and his cape, Iron Man, Black Panther, the Incredible Hulk, Captain Marvel; the list goes on, but when they are not in uniform, when they are walking around as Bruce Wayne, Diana Prince, Peter Parker, Steve Rodgers, Clark Kent, Tony Stark, T'Challa, Bruce Banner, Carol Danvers, they are harder to pick out as superheroes.

The list of superheroes in comic books, on TV, and in movies is long, but it is finite. Sure, more can be created because they are fictional characters, but if we wanted to, we could sit down and figure out the exact number of superheroes and would be able to list their identifiable characteristics.

This is not true of heroes.

A hero is someone who is admired for their courage, achievements, or noble qualities. These are not things that you can put on in the morning like a cape or pair of jeans. Meaning, we cannot know just by looking at someone whether or not they are a hero. But it *does* mean that there are probably an infinite number of heroes in the world. We just have to know how to recognize them.

This week, I chose to continue our "Heroes of the Faith" sermon series with one of the more iconic heroes in the Bible, the Good Samaritan. However, this well-known parable is *not* a story Jesus tells in order to teach people what it means to be a hero; it is the story he uses to exemplify loving your neighbor as yourself. Which is what we are called and commanded to do, just as much as we are called and commanded to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind.

But perhaps being a hero and being a good neighbor are one and the same.

In this parable, we meet a priest and a Levite, which is a member of the tribe of Levi, the priestly tribe. These are respected members, religious leaders, of the Jewish community. When they woke up that morning, before setting off on their journey on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, they donned their own version of a uniform, garb that would make them easily recognizable to anyone they met as men of religious prominence. To many, their outward appearance would trigger an assumption of both closeness to God as well as values of kindness, compassion, and mercy. But instead, when each of these men happens upon the naked and beaten man on the side of the road, neither of them exhibits any kind of concern for the vulnerable, dying man. Quite the contrary actually, instead they instinctively cross to the other side of the road and continue on their way.

Like I said, the characteristics of a hero are not something one wears; unlike superheroes, it does not matter what they wear, they cannot be recognized by how they look and we have to be careful of the assumptions we make based on appearances.

Jesus continues the parable, “but a Samaritan, while traveling along came upon [the man] and when he saw him, he was *moved to compassion...*”

In the context of first century Palestine, it’s important to note that people from Samaria were not held in high regard by the audience to which Jesus is speaking. So although the Samaritan of this parable is an iconic hero of our faith now, at the time he was definitely the *unexpected* hero of the story.

And the Good Samaritan’s actions are truly heroic: he goes above and beyond, not only treating and bandaging the injured man’s wounds, but puts him on his own animal, cares for him overnight at an inn, and then the next day makes sure that he will continue to be cared for in his absence, by providing the means for his recovery: a place to stay, food to eat, medical care, whatever is needed.

So when Jesus asks who the neighbor in the story is, it’s like he’s asking, “who is the hero of this story?” The answer is obvious, “The one who shows mercy.”

Because being a hero or neighbor is not about appearances. Through this parable, Jesus makes it evident that being a hero, and a loving neighbor, is about one’s actions, about how they treat others, especially those in need—with mercy, compassion, and love.

There is another important Scripture passage that goes hand in hand with this parable that I feel I would be remiss to not also mention which comes from Matthew 25.

*‘Come, you who are blessed...inherit the kingdom prepared for you...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me...Truly I tell you, just as you did it [for] one of the least of these [siblings] of mine, you did it [for] me.’*

This passage is a clear statement that what we do and how we treat others matters and is important to God.

The parable of the Good Samaritan exemplifies what it means to be a hero, to love your neighbor as yourself, and what it looks like to live out the Matthew 25 call of caring for those in need and treating all people with dignity.

The Samaritan took care of the man: cared for his injuries, clothed his naked body, provided food, drink, and shelter. And he did all of this for a person he’d never met, a complete stranger.

Have you ever noticed that about this parable? The priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan don’t have names, but are named by their identities. Whereas, the man who is robbed and beaten is given no name, title, or identifiers. All we know is that he is traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. We have no idea who he is, where he’s from, which people he belongs to, or religion he adheres to. But THAT is exactly the point! It. Does. Not. Matter.

The Samaritan is not moved to compassion because the man is a fellow Samaritan, but simply because he is a person in need.

I grew up with this parable; many of you probably did too. I knew I was supposed to admire the Good Samaritan, I was supposed to try and emulate him by being kind, by doing my best to care for others, but it wasn’t

until this sermon that I saw the Samaritan for the hero he is. A hero AND a loving neighbor. I do believe those two things are one and the same.

And again, it's not about how you look, what you wear, or even the things you say. A hero, a loving neighbor is identifiable only by what they do, their actions. It requires turning love into a verb. When one's love is visible and tangible, truly felt by others: that is heroic.

Earlier I said that there are probably an infinite number of heroes in the world. We just have to know how to recognize them. I happen to know that there are heroes among us here, whose love is visible and tangible—like Elaine Pierce, who has opened her home to migrant Venezuelan families, Pat Hahn, who is preparing to donate a kidney, Susan Zaruba, who runs the Kids' Kloset, Kathryn Heavey, who is a pen pal to an incarcerated individual, as well as the many social workers, teachers, nurses, and chaplains, all of whom care for those in need, the vulnerable, and strangers. I think of Bob Haisman, who leaves behind a heroic legacy as a loving neighbor, a champion of social justice issues, a dedicated and passionate teacher, whose love was made visible by his actions.

All of these heroes, right here in our midst, are impossible to identify just by looking at them. But their loving actions speak the truth of who they are, and who we all are called to be.

There are countless heroes among us and across the world. I don't think it's possible to have too many heroes, because it is impossible to have too many loving and caring people in the world. We just have to remember to set aside our assumptions, look beyond surface appearances, and pay attention to the actions of others to be able to recognize the heroes around us and the hero inside ourselves.

Maybe you are sitting there thinking, "I'm no hero." But I wonder...

Have you ever volunteered at a food pantry? Or donated food or money to Beyond Hunger or a similar organization, provided a meal for someone who was hungry, or gave them some of your own meal?

*—I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.*

Have you ever included someone who might otherwise have been excluded? Sat down for lunch with someone who was sitting alone? Have you said hello or given a warm smile to people you pass on the street? Who have you invited and welcomed into your home, your life, our church home?

*—I was a stranger and you welcomed me.*

Have you ever donated clothes, purchased a jacket, gloves, or socks for someone in need of them, or volunteered your time at a resale shop?

*—I was naked and you gave me clothing.*

Have you ever volunteered with a prison ministry, or been a consoling presence for someone in a time of grief or loneliness?

*—I was in prison and you visited me...*

If you answered yes to any of these questions, then Jesus says, "*Truly I tell you, just as you did it [for] one of the least of these [siblings] of mine, you did it [for] me.*"

We are called and commanded to "Love Thy Neighbor."

Love thy immigrant neighbor  
Love thy unhoused neighbor  
Love thy incarcerated neighbor  
Love thy LGBTQIA+ neighbor  
Love thy depressed neighbor  
Love thy neighbor of a different faith  
Love thy atheist neighbor  
Love thy differently-abled neighbor  
Love thy elderly neighbor  
Love thy addicted neighbor  
Love thy neighbor of another culture  
Love thy unknown neighbor  
Love thy [fill in the blank] neighbor.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.”

God wants us to love and care for one another. Loving others is how we love God, and when we turn love into a verb and that love is felt, that is heroic, that is how we fulfill our call to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Heroes love thy neighbors.

In so many ways we are already doing it, but there is always room for more heroes, for more love, for bigger, wider, more radical, unconditional love. The parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us that it is not about how you look or what you say; it is about what you do. Let your love speak volumes through your actions.

So may it be, for you, and for me.

Amen.