

Life: A Hero's Story

Part 1: The Rescue / Sermon 2: The Compassion

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Key Texts: John 3.16; Luke 7.12-13; Matthew 9.35-36; Matthew 14.13-14; Matthew 20.34; Luke 10.41-42; Luke 15; Matthew 12.20

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Summary: We love hero stories – in part because they are echoes of our own story. Now we tend to focus on what a hero does. But before he / she does what he does, he often sees what others can't see, and feels what others don't feel, or finds intolerable what they have learned to tolerate. Today we explore the heart of God.

I just love hero stories. Most of us do. Fantasy heroes like Superman, Batman, the Avengers, X-Men. SciFi heroes like Luke Skywalker, and Hans Solo, or Ellen Ripley fighting Aliens. Noble warriors like Hawkeye in Last of the Mohicans, or Ethan Hunt in Mission Impossible, or Jason Bourne. They stir something in us; they touch something in us. John McClaine, Sarah Connor, Indiana Jones ... Aslan. There is some great danger, or some great evil. And just when it seems like all is lost, there he is, or there she is, doing something heroic ... often at great personal cost. But sometimes we miss these big pieces. You see, we tend to focus on what the hero does, rather than on why he does what he does. There's something that goes before. There's something that works as a catalyst.

- Sometimes the hero sees what others can't see. We talked about that last week.
- And sometimes the hero feels what others don't feel. Or they find intolerable what others have learned to tolerate. That's today.
- And then the hero does what heroes do ... no matter what the cost. That's next week.

You see, it's not just what a hero does, it's also what he sees, and what he feels, that lead to what he does ... right?

- Desmond Doss ... true story. A pacifist combat medic in World War 2. The Japanese drive his unit off of Hacksaw Ridge. But he hears the cries of the wounded, so all night long he sneaks around the battlefield, dragging the wounded to the edge of the escarpment, lowering them down by rope. He rescues 75 soldiers, receiving the Medal of Honor. What he did was incredibly dangerous, and unbelievably hard – it was heroic. But he saw the wounded, and he couldn't tolerate the thought of leaving them to die.

So over and over he prays, “Lord help me get one more.” Guys, if you haven’t seen the movie, it’s a 10.

- Oskar Schindler sees what is happening to the Jews in Poland under the Nazis. I suppose a lot of Germans did. And Schindler felt deep inside that it was wrong, as, I suppose, a lot of Germans did. But he couldn’t tolerate what so many others were trying to tolerate. So, he does something, at tremendous personal cost, at tremendous personal risk ... tormented by the idea that he should have done even more. Again, if you haven’t seen the movie, it’s a 10. And there aren’t that many 10s. It stirs something in us, it touches something inside us.

We take those themes of seeing what others can’t see, and refusing to tolerate what others tolerate, and doing something about it ... at great personal risk ... and we weave them into our super-hero stories. It’s one of the reasons we love them.

- Superman, the man of steel. He was born on Krypton, but sent to earth as a baby, and raised in Kansas. And because he genuinely loved us ... humans ... whenever he saw someone threatening us, he’d fight for us, even if it killed him
- Wonder Woman, the mightiest of the Amazons. She was raised in a virtual utopia. But she was convinced she had the responsibility to protect the rest of us ... mere humans. Even though she learned what messes we are, and she loved us anyway, and was willing to fight to protect us ... to the death if necessary. She could see what others couldn’t see. And she felt what others couldn’t feel, and she found intolerable what others had learned to tolerate. And so she did what heroes do, whatever the cost. ...

So ... what do you see, when you look around you, or even when you look in a mirror? You see a mess, don’t you? This world is a mess, and you are too! Yeah, there’s a lot of good, too. But all of us are such weird mixtures of good and bad, beauty and depravity, nobility and decadence. All of us – every single one of us – were made in the image of God. And yet, all of us – every single one of us – keeps sinning and falling so short of what God made us to be. We’re a mess ... in so many different ways. So, the story I started last week really kind of is ... our story ... metaphorically.

12 years ago the British Medical Journal did a poll trying to identify the most important medical milestone since 1840, when the journal was first published. Essentially, what is the biggest medical milestone of the past 200 years. They identified 15 possibilities and then they voted.

- Third place went to anesthesia. I had minor surgery on my face last week. They cut out another skin cancer. They made about a 3 inch incision down the side of my face, and then stitched it up. I am a big fan of anesthesia. A huge fan!
- Second place went to antibiotics. Anesthesia has saved me from pain many, many times. Antibiotics have saved my life ... more than once. You? I am a big fan of antibiotics. A huge fan!
- First place surprised me. ... Sanitation. Clean water, and sewage disposal. They believe that clean water and toilets have done more for our health than anesthesia, antibiotics, vaccines, X-rays, Cat Scans, MRIs ... you name it. Clean water and toilets.

But here's the deal: Even though the "sanitary revolution" started back in the 1800s, according to the British Medical Journal about 1 billion people in our world still lack clean water and safe sewage disposal. And, when they lack toilets, people just do their business outside, often in some "common area." Which is better than just squatting wherever, I guess. And the negative impact on health is devastating! They calculate that 361,000 children a year die from diarrhea alone. Then you add on stuff like cholera, dysentery, hepatitis A, typhoid, hookworm, roundworm, shistosomiasis, polio. It's a mess! And the World Health Organization thinks the problem is even bigger! They tell us that 2.1 billion people lack safe drinking water at home, (and) more than twice as many lack safe sanitation."

So, what do you do when you see a problem that big? What does seeing that mess do to you, and what do you do about it?

- Does it just disgust you? Do you find it repulsive, so you lean away? Look at the ... crap ... they are drinking! It's disgusting. Look at the ... poop ... they surround themselves with! It's repulsive!
- Or maybe, instead of disgust, and revulsion, maybe you what you feel is pity. It breaks your heart that people actually drink that, that they actually live in that messiness. Maybe it breaks your heart, and then you change the channel, or scroll to the next page or turn your back and walk away.
- Or maybe, maybe you're not really trying to turn your back and walk away, maybe it's just overwhelming. Over 2 billion people without clean water in their homes; over 4 billion people without safe toilets. What can I do to fix a problem that big?
- Or maybe ... maybe we don't give it too much thought because it's so far away. Out of sight, out of mind. Most of the problem is 10,000 miles away. And unless it's right in front of us, unless it's our problem, it's hard to work up too much emotion, isn't it?

- Or maybe ... maybe some of us are just self-absorbed, self-centered, narcissistic, twits. We live in a selfie world, right? That's their problem, not mine. The NPR website published an article 5 months ago – April 15. They titled it, “The End of Empathy,” part of a series entitled “Civility Wars.” They've been tracking this stuff, asking people to respond to ideas like, “It's not really my problem if others are in trouble and need help,” or “Before criticizing somebody I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place.” And we're losing it, they tell us. We are losing our compassion. We are verifiably more self-absorbed, self-centered, and narcissistic. Their polluted water, their lack of toilets – that's their problem, not mine.
- And others ... others of us are just jaded. We've seen so much pain, we've developed these callouses. We have calloused eyes, and calloused hearts. But listen ... Do you think a hero can be jaded? Can a hero have calloused eyes, and a calloused heart?

Well, several international organizations decided they'd try to do something about it – the lack of safe drinking water and the lack of safe sewage disposal. And they started all these water projects and they started building latrines. They'd go to these villages without toilets, and they started building communal latrines. One group was called “WaterAid.” Their mission was to change lives with 3 things: Water, Toilets, and Hygiene. And they funded latrines for some villages in Bangladesh. Then they invited an expert named Dr. Kamal Kar to evaluate their work.

They were great latrines: well designed, well built, and some people even used them. But ... But, Dr. Kar said, “I'd go to the edges of the villages, and around every village there was still poop, everywhere.” Everywhere he went, he'd step in it. Even with the latrines, they'd still do their business outside in these “common areas,” or wherever. And as soon as the rainy season would come, the rain would disperse the poop throughout the villages.

You see, he discovered, it wasn't enough to build toilets, or even for a few to use them. People had to change their “normal,” and that's hard ... for us. The experts had thought it was a hardware problem – if we can build enough latrines, we'll solve the problem. But the problem went way deeper than that. They were trying to fix a problem the people didn't know they had. The people didn't understand how messy they were, and they didn't understand how dangerous their poop was. In fact, some of them actually tore the latrines down so they could use their parts for something more useful. Dr. Kar's team would ask people why they didn't use them. One guy said, “Are you sure I should

poop in there? That place is nicer than my house!” You see, how can you fix a problem when people don’t admit they have a problem? Even though it’s killing them? ... And listen ... listen ... it really is our story, isn’t it? How can you get people to accept rescue from their sins, when they won’t even admit they are sinners? Unless we see the mess we are in, and unless it breaks our heart, how will we be receptive when God tries to rescue us?

So, what would you do next? Would you do anything at all? Would you keep trying? To fix the problem?

- You tried hard! You tried to help, to fix their problem. And they blew it off, still content to live in their filth. Now -- would it disgust you? Now would you think them repulsive?
- Or maybe this time it would be pity. It breaks your heart that they rejected your help. It breaks your heart that they choose to keep living in their squalor. But it’s time to turn your back and walk away ... maybe, right?
- Or maybe ... maybe now it’s time to focus on people who are more receptive to your help. Or maybe even ... maybe it’s time to focus on yourself for a while – you and yours.
- Well What ... would a hero do? What would a hero do? ... What did God do?

Here’s the problem. The Bible says that we were created in the image of God, right? We’re different than the animals. We were created in the image of God. Which means that in some way, we’re like God. We’re not gods! But in some way, we are like God.

But we flip it around. We figure that if we are in the image of God, then God must be like us. Stronger perhaps, smarter, older ... but kind of like us. If their messiness disgusts you, their messiness must absolutely disgust God. Because God is kind of like you, isn’t he? Only on steroids?

- If your sin disgusts you, then your sin must utterly disgust him. If you could see God’s eyes, when he looks at your mess, you’d see disgust, revulsion, wouldn’t you? A legalistic, angry God. Is that how you see God?
- Or maybe it’s pity you’d see. God tried to help you; he tried to point you towards a better way; he tried to rescue you. And you wouldn’t listen. Guys, for some reason, God gives us the ability to blow him off ... at least for now. So now, with pity in his eyes, he turns his back on us in our messiness and walks away ... right?
- Or maybe ... maybe God is just so big, and we are so little, that ... why would he bother at all?

Back in the days of Jesus the philosophers couldn't imagine a transcendent God actually caring about pathetic little creatures like us. The idea that God could cry was absurd. The idea that you could make God cry was absurd. If you could make God cry, then in some way you have power over God, and that would diminish him, right? They figured God must be the unmoved mover. He is the cosmic accountant: passionless, pitiless, perfect.

We still think that way. We know now that this universe is immensely big, and immensely powerful. Maybe 2 trillion galaxies, a few hundred billion stars each. Maybe 13 ½ billion years old. And if there is a God, and if God really is eternal, and if God really is everywhere, and all powerful, and all knowing ... then God must be bigger than the universe?! And older than the universe – infinitely older, and more powerful than all the forces of the universe combined?! We can't fit that into our brains! And if God really does know everything about every piece of cosmic string ... Could God really care, could he actually care, personally care about something as tiny, and as powerless, and as flawed as you ... or me?! That whole idea is absurd, isn't it? It's flat out crazy!

But would any of these ... human-like responses to our messiness ... make God our ... hero? If we just disgust him; or if he just pities us as he walks away; or if he is just too big, and too far away, and too perfect to really care ... Well, what would a hero do?

(John 3.16) The Bible tells us that God ... sent ... his Son. We can barely fathom that! God sent his Son, into this messy, messy, village we call home. A village without clean water, without toilets, fouled by a mess to which we have all contributed. And God knew all that ... and he came anyway! Do you have any idea how crazy that sounds?! Especially if you understand that what that really means is that God came himself, into our world. You see, we believe that Jesus really is God! He's the Creator God! He's the eternal, all powerful God! God in a bod! Why would he do that? What is there about us that our mess would elicit that kind of a response from our Creator? That a God that big would actually care for creatures so little, and so broken. There are galaxies to take care of, and God sends his Son ... here?! We got so lost in the enormity of God, that we just can't believe he would actually care about broken, insignificant creatures like us. So, God proves it ... by coming

And when he gets here, what does God see, and what does God feel, and what does God do?

- (Luke 7.12-13) One time, Jesus was walking along a road with his disciples, and they saw a funeral procession coming the other way. A dead boy was being carried out, the only son of his mother, who was a widow. An insignificant nobody ... like ... you, or me. And when Jesus looks at her, it says, “His heart went out to her.” The NLT says, “His heart overflowed with compassion.” The Message says, “His heart broke.” ... God’s heart broke?! ... God cares, about someone so little, so insignificant?!
- (Matthew 9.35-36) Matthew, who was there, tells us that Jesus was going around telling people that God had something way better for them. And he was healing their sick. And bigger than all that, Matthew says, “When Jesus saw the crowds,” (When God saw the crowds, of self-absorbed, broken, insignificant little nobodies ... like us) “he had compassion on us because we were confused and helpless ... desperately needing rescue. I don’t know why God cares ... but he does!
- (Matthew 14.13-14) One time, Jesus’ earthly cousin was murdered. And ... “God,” grieved. Go figure! And “God the Son” tried to get away from the crowds for a while for some time alone with God His Father. It didn’t work. The crowds discovered where he was and mobbed him – because sometimes our pain prevents us from seeing the pain of another. And Jesus didn’t scold them. And he didn’t try to hide. He just got back to it. These broken people broke God’s heart. So, he healed us, and he taught us, and he fed us.
- (Matthew 20.34) Later on, these two blind guys ... Understand, in that world they didn’t make special provisions for people with disabilities. They tossed them out. They were considered pretty much worthless. In fact, they thought God had tossed them out as pretty much worthless. These two blind guys kept trying to get Jesus’ attention. And the crowd kept trying to shut them up. And, Matthew says – and Matthew was there – he says, Jesus was deeply moved; he felt this intense pity for these two nobodies. God cared! But it didn’t stop there. He touched their eyes – God touched their eyes – and immediately they could see. God can do stuff like that.
- (Luke 19.41-42) Near the end of his physical stay on earth, Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem – he was on his way to die in Jerusalem. These Jews were the people God kept trying to use to change the world. And these were the people who kept messing it up. And, Luke says, “As Jesus came closer to Jerusalem and saw the city ahead, he began to weep. (God ... began to cry, for these precious little misfits. Does that blow your mind?!

And then he says ... then God says,) “How I wish today that you of all people would understand the way to peace. But now it is too late, and peace is hidden from your eyes.” ... like he really cared!

- In the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15, Jesus, the Son of God, tries to give us a picture of the heart of his Father. He says, God is like a crazy farmer who loses one sheep out of a hundred. And he searches, and he searches, and he searches until he finds even that one stupid, errant sheep ... one of us. And then he says, God is like a poor old woman who loses just one coin. And she searches, and she cleans, and she hunts until she finds that one little coin, so precious to her ... like you are to God. God is like that with you, Jesus says. And then he says, God is like a crazy Father of a miserable son. Instead of writing the kid off, he waits, and he looks, and he longs for his jerk kid until his kid recognizes what a mess he is. And then God runs – God runs! – to embrace his precious stupid kid. God is like that ... with you, Jesus says. And he proves it ... on a cross.

We get our word “compassion” from the Latin word, “compassio” – “to suffer with.” When you hurt, God hurts. It’s kind of like the word “sympathy,” from the Greek: “syn” – together with; “pathos” – to suffer ... “to suffer with.” He not only sees you, he cares. The Hebrew word is “racham,” which can also be translated, “womb.” It describes the feeling of a mother towards her baby. Do you actually think God -- the almighty, infinite, creator God – feels that way when he looks at you? Like a mama on steroids? The Greek word is “splangchnon.” It means literally, your guts, your innards, like your heart, your liver, your kidneys, and your lungs. Do you know why? Because when you feel an emotion deeply, you feel it in the pit of your stomach. You see, the ancients thought the brain was where you did your thinking, but your guts were where you did your feeling.

And that’s the word they kept choosing to describe the heart of Jesus ... to describe the heart of God. Splangchnon – compassion, he actually cares, that deeply! When God looks at you, do you see disgust, and revulsion, and anger in his eyes, especially at your messiest? Do you see pity, as he shakes his head and walks away from you ... because you are so stubborn in your sin? Do you see an unfeeling, apathetic God ... passionless, pitiless, perfect? So big, so distant, so powerful, that he can hardly be bothered by an insignificant little twit like you? If you see any of those things, you are not looking into the face of God.

You see ... where do you think the notion of a hero really came from? Why do you think these hero stories stir us so? Why do you think they touch something deep inside us? Because ... they really are our story, aren't they? If we understand which part we play. We are not the hero of our story; we are the rescued ones.

Too often, messiness causes us to lean away from people. So how is it that messiness causes our God to lean in? And why is it so hard for us to believe, to accept, to embrace? Maybe our perception of God is still too small. Maybe because we recreate God into our image. We figure if we find it so difficult to love someone so messy, surely God must find it hard too, right? No. No! No!! He's God!

Matthew – and Matthew stayed by Jesus' side till he knew God's heart – Matthew says of Jesus, "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, till he leads justice to victory." (Matthew 12.20) A fragile, broken reed – like you, or like me -- will be safe in his hands. An unsteady, wavering, struggling little flame – like you, or like me -- God nurses. The New Living Translation makes it a little plainer. It says, "He will not crush those who are weak, or quench the smallest hope, until he brings full justice with his final victory."

2000 years ago people like us stirred the heart of Jesus, and we still do, stir the heart of ... God ... Jesus proved. His gut is wrenched, his heart is torn open. Never forget that when we speak of the compassion of Jesus, we're talking about the compassion of the infinite, transcendent, almighty God. That's who Jesus was. The compassion of Jesus is the compassion of God himself. And Jesus is saying to you this morning, "Never be so foolish as to measure my compassion for you in terms of your compassion for each other. Don't be so silly as to compare your thin, pallid, wavering, capricious, fickle, moody human compassion with mine. For I am God as well as man." Do you believe that?

One of the greatest theologians of the 20th century, a guy named Paul Tillich, defined "faith" like this. He says, "Faith is the courage to accept acceptance. It is the courage to accept God's acceptance. Faith is the courage to accept that Jesus, knowing your whole life's story, every skeleton in your closet, every moment of sin, shame, dishonesty, every moment of degraded love, knowing right now your shallow faith, your feeble prayer life, your inconsistent discipleship, loves and accepts you as you are, and not as you should be, because you'll never be as you should be. Listen ... You can come to church and sing songs and take communion, you can go home and read your Bible and

pray every day, but until that day you accept that you are loved by God, and accepted by God, you haven't yet fully believed. Folks, this has been the biggest struggle of my spiritual life. And I know it's a struggle for a whole lot of you. But it's the word of God! It's the promise of God.

- Sometimes the hero sees what others can't see. That was last week.
- And sometimes the hero feels what others don't feel. That's today.
- And then the hero does what heroes do ... no matter what the cost. That's next week. And that's where the story of God with us completely blows our minds.