July 17, 2016 Pentecost 9
Luke 10:38-42 Pastor Jeff Laustsen

"Unlikely Heroes"

"… there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

When one thinks of a hero, the name Elizabeth Fry usually doesn't come to mind. Born on May 21, 1780 in Norwich, England, Fry was the daughter of a prominent banker who was a devout Quaker. When her mother died when she was 12, Fry took an active role in bringing up her other siblings. When she was 20 she married Joseph Fry, who was also a banker and a Quaker, and together they had eleven children. As a strict Quaker, she didn't engage in activities like dancing or singing; her life could have been like that of many women of her time and place, devoted to keeping her home and raising her children. But at an early age, Fry became friendly with Amelia Alderson, whose family were active in the movement for universal suffrage, and was also influenced by the American Quaker William Savery who spoke of the importance of tackling poverty and injustice. She became inspired to become involved in helping local charities and Sunday schools; it as through this work that Elizabeth Fry first visited Newgate Prison, where she was shocked by the squalid and unsanitary conditions that caused both bad health and fighting among the prisoners. In 1813, she wrote that *"all I tell thee is a faint picture of reality; the filth, the closeness of the rooms, the furious manner and expressions of the women toward each other, and the abandoned wickedness, which everything bespoke are really indescribable."* For the rest of her life, Elizabeth Fry devoted herself to humanitarian causes, beginning with the treatment of female prisoners at Newgate and expanding her concerns to reforms for mental asylums and the education of women. Even though she was criticized by some people for neglecting her role as mother and housewife, Elizabeth Fry became an important figure in giving women a higher profile in public affairs and a forerunner for later suffragists who campaigned for women to be given the vote. Long after her death in 1845, her legacy lives on the numerous Elizabeth Fry Societies across Canada who continue to *"support criminalized and marginalized women, girls and children in achieving [their] potential."*

When we think of a hero, we often imagine someone who engages in feats that dazzle and amaze us. It might be a mythical figure like Hercules, or a comic book hero like Batman or Superman. It might be an historical figure who won glorious battles, or a person who overcame enormous obstacles to achieve their goals. In modern times, sports figures often become heroes, scoring the winning goal or hitting the last-second shot to lead their team to victory. Heroes are *"persons of distinguished courage or ability, admired for their brave deeds and noble qualities."* By this definition, however, true heroes are not the ones who gain notoriety or publicity; it is often the case that true heroes are often unlikely heroes, persons who don't fit our preconceived notions of heroism but whose deeds truly define them as heroic figures. A real hero is not necessarily *"the handsome actor who plays a hero's role [or] the champion player who plays the perfect game,"* but a person who *"lands a crippled airplane, solves great mysteries … is the voice of reason against the howling mob, is the pride of purpose in the unrewarding job."* ("Nobody's Hero," Rush). Real heroes are often unlikely heroes.

On the second and third Sunday in July, we have been introduced to two unlikely heroes in Luke's Gospel. One is a fictional character, the "Good Samaritan" who comes to the aid of the wounded traveler on the side of the road. The other is a person from Jesus' life, Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. While they are different in many ways, they both represent marginalized persons who are the unlikeliest of heroes in their respective stories. The Samaritan was a member of an ethnic group that was despised by the people of Israel; Mary was a woman, who society relegated to certain roles that did not include sitting at the feet of a rabbi in the place of a disciple (morning prayers would thank God that "you have not made me a woman"). Yet both of these marginalized persons are the true heroes of their stories: the Good Samaritan exemplifies the meaning of the commandment to *"love your neighbor as yourself,"* while Mary exemplifies the virtue of devotion to God *"with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind"* (10:27). As a

composite, these two unlikely heroes are models of discipleship, of those who *"hear the Word of God and do it."* (8:21).

The Good Samaritan's heroism is seen in his risking his safety in coming to the aid of the wounded traveler. It could have been a trap; robbers might have placed one of their own along the roadside in order to lure unsuspecting travelers into their grasp. The Samaritan was on a journey, and his delaying his arrival might have risked the purpose for which he was traveling. When he brought the wounded man to an inn, he was probably entering enemy territory, an establishment where his kind would not have been welcomed. The Good Samaritan is the hero of the story, a true neighbor, because he is willing to *"risk his position, his prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others. In dangerous valleys and hazardous pathways, he will lift some bruised and beaten brother to a higher and more noble life."* (Martin Luther King, Jr., "On Being a Good Neighbour").

The heroism of Mary is at first not as apparent as that of the Good Samaritan. Jesus' encounter with Mary and Martha is set in the context of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem that began *"when the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem"* (9:51). His actions upon entering *"a certain village"* (Bethany, east of Jerusalem) echoes his instructions to his disciples that *"whenever you enter a town and they welcome you, eat what is set before you"* (10:8). Martha is the first to welcome Jesus into her home, and she then busies herself with the tasks of serving her guest, which probably included preparing a meal, thus fulfilling the cultural expectation of hospitality to one's guest (seen in Genesis 18 when Abraham and Sarah prepare a meal for the strangers who come to their threshold). Hospitality was recognized as a sacred duty in the ancient world, for a host never knew when they would find themselves dependent on others.

Luke introduces us next to the other sister, Mary, who *"sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying."* (10:40). While this may sound innocent to us, in Jesus' day such behavior would have been scandalous, for Mary is sitting in the place of a disciple, listening to Jesus' word (Paul speaks of his sitting *"at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to ancestral law"* in Acts 22:3). By sitting at Jesus' feet, Mary is acting like a male. She neglects her duty to assist her sister in the preparation of the meal, and by violating a clear social boundary she would be bringing shame upon her house. In these circumstances we can understand why Martha interrupts Jesus' teaching of Mary by asking him, *"Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."* (10:40). Unlike Mary, Martha is fulfilling the role assigned to her by society; she also exemplifies the kind of service to others that Jesus commended in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. But Martha's focus on fulfilling the cultural norms of hospitality have created a problem: she has become *"distracted by her many tasks."* One who is "distracted" *(periespato)* is being pulled or dragged in different directions; for Martha, it has resulted in her being pulled away from hearing the Word of God that Jesus is sharing with Mary, who is claiming the same role that the apostles will later claim for themselves (*"It is not right that we should neglect the Word of God in order to wait on tables."* – Acts 6:2).

Martha's cares about fulfilling her duties have thrown her life into disorder. It is out of concern over what such distractions are doing to her than Jesus answers her demand with *"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."* (10:41-42). Martha's distractions and worry have left no room for the most important aspect of hospitality, which is gracious attention to one's guest. She goes so far as to break the rules of hospitality by trying to embarrass her sister in front of her guest, and by asking her guest to intervene in a family dispute. She even goes so far as to accuse Jesus of not caring about her (*"Lord, do you not care …"*).

- "Martha's worry and distraction prevent her from being truly present with Jesus, and cause her to drive a wedge between her sister and herself, and between Jesus and herself. She has missed out on the 'one thing needed' for true hospitality. There is no greater hospitality than listening to your guest. How much more so when the guest is Jesus!" – Elisabeth Johnson.

While it is important for followers of Jesus to *"extend hospitality to strangers"* (Romans 12:13), the duty of the love of God and obedience to God's Word take precedence over all other concerns. By choosing to attend to Jesus' teachings while laying aside everything else, Mary exemplifies what it means to *"love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind."* (10:28). Jesus' words to Martha are more of an invitation than a rebuke, welcoming her to take a seat beside her sister in the place of a disciple so that she too may be fed by the Word of Life that Jesus offers. *"The one thing needed is for Martha to receive the gracious presence of Jesus, to listen to his words, to know that she is valued not for what she does or how well she does it, but for who she is as a child of God."* (Johnson).

- "But we must not cartoon the scene: Martha up to her eyeballs in soapsuds, Mary pensively on a stool in the den, and Jesus giving scriptural warrant for letting dishes pile high in the sink. If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever. There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect. Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment. If we were to ask Jesus which example applies to us, the Samaritan or Mary, his answer would simply be 'yes.'" – Fred Craddock.

Mary is the hero of this story because she accepts Jesus' invitation to sit at his feet in the place of a disciple even if it creates a scandal among those who do not believe that women should be in such a place. In inviting Martha to hear his teaching, Jesus is inviting her to join her sister in the hero's place, to become a role model for what it truly means to be a disciple of Jesus and a hero of faith as one who believes that there is a place for all people in the presence of the Lord.

As Jesus invites Martha to take the place of the hero alongside her sister, we are also invited to take our place in our Lord's presence, believing that we are here because our Lord has welcomed us into this place. Being a hero is not an easy task; it often requires courage, sacrifice, and the ability to remain steadfast in the face of opposition and even persecution. Who knows what might have happened if Mary and Martha's neighbors looked through their windows and saw then sitting in a place where only men were welcomed? What kind of scandal might this have caused in the streets of Bethany? Would their family and friends have shunned them, or brought then before the authorities to answer for their unlawful behavior? Would they be presented with an ultimatum, to either conform to societal norms or be driven out of town? What sacrifices would Mary and Martha have to endure in order to remain in the place of a disciple of Jesus Christ?

The call for each of us is to take our place in the presence of Jesus as a child of God, as a disciple of our Lord and Saviour, and as a hero who is called to take a courageous stand even in the face of ridicule and opposition. It is the call that has been answered by many unlikely heroes throughout the history of the Christian Church:

- Mary the mother of Jesus, who dared to believe the message of the angel Gabriel that the child she would bear would be *"great, and be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of our ancestor David"* (Luke 1:32), even if it meant creating a scandal when it was discovered she was carrying a child that was not her fiancé's.
- The apostle Paul, who as Saul of Tarsus was an enemy of the early church, was called by Christ to be *"an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."* (Acts 9:15-16).
- Martin Luther, a professor at an obscure German university who was called to confront the church over its abuses and bring it back to being a faithful witness to the Word of God, even if it meant living as a wanted man for most of his life. Luther's heroism was on display at the Diet of Worms, when he declared in the face of the most powerful forces of opposition that *"unless I am convinced of error by the testimony of Scripture or by manifest reasoning … I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to act against conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us. On this I take my stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."*

- Martin Luther King, Jr., who turned his back on a comfortable position as pastor of a prominent congregation in the segregated South in order to fight for equal rights for all people, even at the cost of his life on April 4, 1968, believing that *"injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere"* and that *"a man who does not have something for which he is willing to die is not fit to live."*

Jesus' call to discipleship is a call to heroism, to take our place as Jesus' followers even at the risk of all things. We are not heroes who can accomplish superhuman feats by our own heroic abilities; but when we are faithful to Christ's call to live heroically in our daily lives, we will be able *"by the power of work within us … to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or accomplish."* (Ephesians 3:20). As Elizabeth Fry's heroism grew out of her faith that called her to devote her life to those on the margins of society, it is the marginalized persons in Jesus's life and teaching – the Samaritan and Mary – who are the unlikely but authentic heroes of faith and discipleship. No matter who we may be, no matter how others might view us, we too can be heroes – sitting at the feet of Jesus, believing in his word, daring to go forward in spite of the circumstances or opposition, boldly declaring the love of God for all people in Jesus Christ our Lord.

We can be heroes – here and now, today and every day! Amen.