

“Do The Good That Is Yours to Do”

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, December 15, 2024

Texts: Luke 3: 7-16 and Isaiah 58: 9-12

For decades, many of us have belted out the lyrics to Tina Turner’s “*We Don’t Need Another Hero*”. At the same time, we look for the “hero narrative” -- seeking someone to come and save the day like life is some kind of superhero comic book where one person can come in, change the world, and save the day. We look for this person in our politics, our workplaces, our neighborhoods, our communities, and even in the church. This is particularly true in times of crisis – which it seems we’re always in. Could someone just come and save the day? Could someone come along and make the change the world needs right here, right now? We make movies and write novels full of this narrative, and honestly, it only works in the movies. To make real change, we need a different narrative. We need something bigger. Something better. Something more lasting. Many call it a “movement narrative.”

I love the materials we get from Sanctified Arts. Each week, they suggest a book, and article, a podcast, or a TEDx talk (like this week) that really get to the heart of what the theme of the day is speaking to. This week, I

listened to a TEDx Talk by David Lamotte entitled, “Why heroes don’t change the world”. If you Google it, it’s easy to find. He wasn’t slamming heroes, but he was challenging whether or not heroism leads to real change.

Take any crisis. Heroes come from near and far and “save the day”. Truly, they do. No one is saying we don’t need heroes. But here’s how it works: we have a crisis, we wait for the hero to arrive, watch him or her act, and then we clap and move on. Lamotte asserts that there is “no example of something happening in crisis that led to change by one person.” A rescue, yes. A heart-warming story, yes. Life-altering change, not so much.

He speaks of the story of Rosa Parks. Many of you know the story of her refusing to move her seat that many of us learned about in school (or perhaps you lived through it!). Rosa Parks was tired after working and took her seat on the bus. In those days, in Montgomery, black people were to give up their seat if a white person boarded the bus. Rosa Parks refused and was arrested. Her arrest, so we were taught, directly led to the Montgomery Bus boycott. To some extent that is true, but what they didn’t tell you was that by the time Rosa Parks was arrested she had already been participating in the Civil Rights movement. She had been the secretary of the NAACP for 12 years. She

trained at the Highlander Center in Tennessee about how to secure voting rights. She was a member of the Women's Political Council. For the complete story, and the names of others who made this possible, check out the TEDx talk. All Lamotte is saying is that while Rosa Parks was courageous, she was not alone. She had many behind her. In other words, "they didn't wait to build the fire station after the fire was started." The hero narrative only tells what Rosa Parks did, but only the movement narrative tells the rest of the story. Rideshares set up something like a dispatch service, for example. All of the things behind the scenes made it possible for the boycott to be successful.

Again, we're not taking away from Rosa Parks or any other hero. Just filling in what else takes place to make change that requires all of us – or many of us – to accomplish.

Lamotte tells us there is good news and bad news to the movement narrative. The bad news: committees change the world!

The movement narrative works like this: A problem presents itself (in other words, figure out what you want to work on – to change), find your people (folks interested in the same thing), do an asset inventory to see what

we have to make this change happen, make an achievable short-term goal toward your desired change, do the work to achieve that goal. Five steps. But after that, Lamotte tells us to follow the directions on our shampoo containers which read, “Rinse and repeat.”

What does all of this have to do with you and me, and with our scriptures for today? Well, how many of us have said, “Anything I say or do is simply a drop in the ocean”, or some other comment that says we cannot make a difference in the world? Here’s the thing, “Advent reminds us that Christ came into a world fraught with the very same issues of injustice and inequality that we face, and he did not turn away. Instead, he showed us a way forward: engaged action rooted in compassion. (Kayla Craig, Sanctified Arts).”

We think, “[But] I’m just one person. What can I do?” Kayla Craig, in her commentary on our passages responds, “As followers of Christ, we’re invited to consider a different question, one rooted in hope and action: ‘What’s mine to do?’ This week’s scripture calls us to a profound yet simple truth: ‘I can’t do it all, but I can do something that matters.’”

Our Luke passage speaks of John the Baptist. He is a rather odd character in some ways and his language is blunt, but when asked by community members what they should do, he tells them this: to the crowds, “Share what you have.”; to the tax collectors, ‘Take no more than your due.’; to the soldiers, ‘Do no harm in pursuit of personal gain.’” Craig reminds us, “Each instruction differs, yet the core message is the same: Do the good that is yours to do.

There is a second part to John’s wisdom, though, “We labor in vain if we are only relying on our own strength. With God’s help, we are able to do the work that is ours to do.” In the Isaiah reading, we are called to be “repairers of the breach”, but we’re never called to do this alone.

Short-term, dramatic, life-saving things can happen at the hands of an individual hero, but long-term, life-changing things happen when a group forms, supported and encouraged by God. Further, each small action adds up. “You can’t solve all the world’s problems, but you can do something that matters.”

How should you discern what is yours to do? David LaMotte, who I mentioned earlier, also wrote a book called *You Are Changing the World:*

Whether You Like It or Not. In that book, LaMotte says there are two questions for discerning what is yours to do. The first is, “What is bugging you? What frustrates, enrages, or persistently tugs at you? Some callings are born from the need to make something right. A corollary question is, “What inspires you? What do you see happening in the world that makes you sit up a bit straighter and feel a little more hopeful about the human race? After responding to either of these questions, the next thing to ask is, “What small thing can I do about it?” Brian McLaren adds to this idea, “This hot-mess world needs changing, and there are beautiful, unique contributions that only you can make. Your life will be so much more full and meaningful for making them.”

The example I’d use around here is Community Meal. I’m sure there was a hero or two involved, but I’m sure that people gathered in a group, talked about the need for the meal, and then they worked together to make it happen. Even today, the meal doesn’t happen just because Tony is here, but because groups adopt the evening and bring food, others donate finances, the Community Foundation and others grant money to buy the food, the church supplies the kitchen and fellowship hall, and on and on. No one person could serve a meal that size for these many years virtually every Friday

night. And yet, with many committed people on various levels, doing what they can, a meal is served most Friday nights.

The truth is we can't be, as the hit song says, "Waiting on the world to change." It takes me, and you, and all of us, to make the world we desire. We can't wait on the hero to step in and fix it all. Notice how we often do that every 2 to 4 years when we vote the person who is going to change everything. How is that working for us?

We are all called to do the good that is ours to do. It doesn't matter the size of our action, just that we act. And perhaps the best action is to start sharing with others what you hope for the world. Or maybe just start here. What hopes do you have for this church? What do you see in our future? What is our unique calling? And, most importantly, what is your role in that future?

Tina Turner was right that we don't really need another hero. We need a whole group of change agents. We need a movement. And no matter what we do or don't do, our choices do, in fact, impact the world. Even (and maybe especially) doing absolutely nothing has an impact, too. So, what will we choose? What will you choose?

What is the good that is yours to do? Discern it and do it!

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.