

## Our Hero

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All Saints Sunday  
Sunday, November 4, 2018  
Mark 12:28-34

It was a crazy week. A week to end all weeks. An exhausting seven days full of chaos and shouting and unwanted visits from out of town. From the fake parade with the palm fronds, to flipping over the tables in the middle of the Temple, to the constant cat-and-mouse game of preaching and teaching in the street, he was so tired of this Jesus and his shenanigans. This scribe, Our Hero, who Mark doesn't name, had seen Jesus doing his thing, and like every scribe, he wasn't a fan, to say the least. Our Hero had been at the meeting where they talked about trying to get him, theologically or otherwise, because Jesus is wrong, loud wrong, and does not seem to be going away anytime soon. Our Hero isn't so sure about the "otherwise," but he is sure that Jesus is on the other team – the non-scribe team, the non-Temple team, the non-Our God team. And once it became clear that he isn't one of Us, it is just as clear that he is one of Them. The lines were drawn, Us and Them, and Them is no good. For Team Scribe has spent the last thousand years or so faithfully, dutifully working out what is right and good and holy. Despite how Jesus out-argued and out-taught them, the scribes are no fools. They have prayer, scriptural study and wisdom on their side. They know who God is and how God operates. And this in-town-for-the-holidays rabbi? Well, he is not it. So, Our Hero enters the scene to do his part for his team, to step up to the plate and take a theological swing at this unwanted interloper.

But the closer he gets, the more he listens. And the more he listens, the more he appreciates. And the more he appreciates, the less he wants to take a swing and the more he wants just to ask a question. Our Hero's team colors fade away and his intent softens and his curiosity surges. Our Hero sees Jesus for who he really is, as much as any human can, I suppose. Isn't that usually the way that enemies stop being enemies? We see someone on their own terms. We shut out the rhetoric we've stored up in our inner monologue. We take off the team colors. We listen. We see someone as they are, as the human they are, and not just as Them.

Now I want to be clear, after the events of last weekend at the Tree of Life synagogues in Pittsburgh. Evil is still evil. Indeed, there is far too much evil these days. Murder is evil. Murder of the innocent is seems more evil. Murder in a house of God seems even more evil. All sides are not the same. As Jesus is about to remind his followers, when one of them draws a sword to fight off those who would arrest the Messiah, violence is repugnant to God. Love your neighbor as yourself. Mourn with those who mourn. Work for a world in which every door, sanctuary or otherwise, that is opened is done so in love and respect. Evil is still evil.

But perhaps we can learn something about enemies. On the eve of another important, divided, end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it election, we can stand with Our Hero as his understanding of his enemy grows and as his enmity melts away. We can stand with Our Hero as he takes the time to listen to what Jesus is actually saying, and not how Team Scribe has paraphrased in their political ads. We can stand with Our Hero as he asks an honest question authentically, signaling that Jesus might be able to give an equally honest answer. When was the

last time a scribe wanted to learn from Jesus? When was the last time we wanted to learn from Them? When was the last time our question asked an actual question? “Which commandment is the first of all?”

And then, the impossible happens. Our Hero’s enemy is right. This rabble-rousing, table-flipping, Team-Scribe-out-foxing enemy is right. Jesus cites the Shema, right out of Deuteronomy, chapter 6, “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” He even includes the “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one,” part which gives the text its name. Shema is a Hebrew word meaning hear, but also listen and obey. No other word in Hebrew means obey. Hear God, listen to God, obey God, which is music to Our Hero’s ears, and maybe even to ours, because that’ll preach anywhere and everywhere. Clearly, Jesus is on point. This is one of the less recognized miracles of Jesus’ entire earthly ministry right here – Jesus and a scribe find their common ground and agree on something. It really doesn’t happen that often, you know, and especially not with the arresting authorities lurking around the corner in a chapter or two. Two opposing sides recognize that their Venn diagram overlaps far more than they could have imagined, or at least than Our Hero could have imagined.

Perhaps that is one of the great tasks of people of faith, or of people of faith and politics, or of people in general – approach enemies with honesty and authenticity in search of the common ground that we might share. Of course, that’s even harder than it sounds, and it sounds pretty hard two days before an election, because authenticity means neither leaving behind who we are nor looking past who they are. It is civility, which is a quaint word, but at the heart of what’s going on here. So, I turned to author and pillar of faith Brene Brown and her book *Braving the Wilderness*. In it, she uses this definition for civility, which she borrows from the Institute for Civility in Government, “Civility is claiming and caring for one’s identity, needs, and beliefs without degrading someone else’s in the process. ...It is about disagreeing without disrespect, seeking common ground as a starting point for dialogue about differences, listening past one’s preconceptions, and teaching others to do the same.” We know for a fact that it has been all disagreeing with total disrespect for Jesus coming from Team Scribe since he began his public ministry. Civility was nonexistent and unthinkable. But then Our Hero stepped up to the plate. If a scribe can do it with Jesus, then there’s hope for us all. There’s hope for us all that they answer they give would be the answer that we give. There’s hope that we can cut past the fear and dead-ends. There’s hope with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, we can see the image of God in the other team, and learn to love each of our neighbors as ourselves. We can stop living into the false dichotomy of Us and Them. We can stop burning things up and calling it an offering or making inappropriate sacrifices to old ways of thinking and doing. Instead, we can love the authentic humanity of our enemy-turned-neighbor.

In a few minutes, we will celebrate the Lords’ Supper, the Supper of the One who flipped tables, answered wisely, told his followers to put down their swords, and died for our sins. Because it is Christ’s table and not ours, and he bids us all come, we will surely be seated next to both enemies and neighbors alike, for the criteria to take and eat, to drink and remember, is not any sort of worthiness or unanimity on our part, thanks be to God.

But this week, there is an extra dimension. It is All Saints Sunday, so during the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, we will read the names of those members of this congregation and of those loved ones of our members who have died in the last year. We will do so because we are thankful for them and love them. We will do so because we proclaim that we eat together not just with those in this room but with all the faithful throughout time and space and any other dimension we can think of. I once served at a church where there was a special orange table cloth that we used always and only on All Saints Sunday. What made it special was not its color – although I dare you to find orange in the liturgical calendar – but that every year as a part of the worship service, we wrote down the names of the congregants who had died in the past year, as well as other beloved folks. Over time, it began to fill up with those names, beautiful and broken people, from all different teams and with all different enemies, whose written names reminded us that space and time and enmity and division cease in this sacrament. Now, just for a moment, imagine all of the names that would be on an orange table cloth if we had started writing them in 1871, when First Presbyterian Church was founded. Imagine. We'd need a bigger table cloth. We might even need a bigger sanctuary. So many names. So many saints. We read and pray the names this year, just as we do every year, because we trust that they are standing with God now.

And isn't that what a saint is? Someone who stands with God, as best they can. Saints aren't perfect, of course, no more than you or me or Our Hero. After all, Our Hero the scribe didn't stop Jesus' arrest or any of the events that followed. No one did. Not Mary. Not Peter. Not Pilate. The names that we pray are not perfect people, and if we are to pray them authentically, we know that and love them anyway. Perfection is an impossible standard, and love is the closest we can get to it. Love, Jesus says. Love God. Love your neighbor. Love yourself. He does not say, "be perfect." Instead, we can perhaps remember where and when they did love, even if only for a moment, and strive to love like that. Saints who stood with God, as best they could. Indeed, we ourselves might be saints, might be heroes who love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all our strength. We might love our neighbors like ourselves, more than burned up offerings or inappropriate sacrifices or team colors. We might remember that our neighbors, our enemies, our heroes are just like ourselves, deep down, at the basic human level where paraphrasing and preconceptions and inner monologues do not exist. In the midst of elections, of unspeakable violence and evil, and of an uncertain future full of enemies around every corner, we might be saints and we might be heroes. And then we might not be far from the kingdom of God. Amen.