

"ONLY HEROES NEED APPLY"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
February 23, 1997

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### INTRODUCTION

Let's go back to last summer's Olympics, to one of its most memorable moments...before the bomb, before the bowed heads and the silent moments, before the Olympic flag billowing at half-mast, there was the heroic story of the young woman whose name was Kerri Strug.

"Many of you watched the Olympics and were stunned when a 4 foot 8 inch 18 year old woman charged down a runway, vaulted through the air and landed on a leg so badly sprained that it could hold her upright for only a second. Just long enough to ensure the first gold medal ever won by a US Women's Gymnastic team. A few minutes later, while a crowd of 32,000 screamed and pounded each other on the back, six small, red-white-and-blue Olympians marched out for their medals, trailed only by their wounded teammate who was carried in the arms of her coach".

For Mark Starr, a writer for Newsweek, it was an athletic feat inscribed for the ages. It had been a closely fought match all afternoon, with the Americans surging ahead on the uneven bars, then maintaining their lead along the perilous balance beam and through their spectacular floor routines. All they needed were solid performances on the vault and they would win. The first four women all flipped safely. The fifth tried twice and failed both times. Kerri Strug was last and on her first try she sprawled ingloriously on the mat.

The crowd, pro USA, grew quiet. Few noticed that Kerri who had rolled over on her ankle and "felt a snap" had stood up staring down at her leg in dismay. "Shake it off" urged her teammates as she hobbled back down the runway.

"I don't think they understood there was something wrong" she said afterward. "I felt the gold medal was slipping away".

When her coach, Bela Karolyi, leaned over the boards to call instructions, Kerri cried out that she was in pain. Then she asked him, "Do I have to do the second vault?" Uncertain that the USA was safely ahead, Bela shrugged, "I encouraged her" he later on said...."but she was the one who had to answer that." Kerri went back out on the runway, whispered a little prayer asking "God to help me out...somehow". And then she vaulted into history!

### DEVELOPMENT

It's the kind of story that makes the Olympics so popular. It makes your heart beat a little faster when you see someone take on a challenge against great odds and be successful. This, of course, is the secret of exciting motion pictures. It might be the challenge of going where "no man has ever gone before"...a la Star Trek, or winning a boxing match... a la Rocky...or watching Tiger Woods on TV hit a golf ball to within inches of the pin in a play-off, or Desmond Howard running back a kick-off in the Super Bowl. The adversary may be cruel Nazis...or the mob...or corrupt police...or simply personal limitations. But there is something about watching our "hero" battle the forces of evil and then...just as things look darkest winning a great battle that brightens our outlook on life and helps us believe that there is always hope even in the darkest hour...in the bleakest situation.

### STORY OF JESUS

This, of course, is the story of Jesus. All of the might of the Roman Empire was arrayed against Him. Nails were driven into His hands and feet. A sword pierced His side. He was buried in a borrowed grave and just when His foes thought they had laid this carpenter to rest forever, just when they thought they had triumphed over His Kingdom of love and compassion, just when they were feeling comfortable with their treachery, a stone mysteriously moved in front of a borrowed grave and this Man who would not be defeated, whose love is stronger than any army that might be sent against Him, whose spirit is alive even today, this unique Man with the print of nails still visible in His hands and feet stepped forward to conquer the world.

To me, it is a story that encourages us to go on when life is cruel and adversaries are numerous. It is a story that encourages us to attempt the heroic. It is a story that should always remind us that love is stronger than hate, that life is stronger than death, that right is stronger than wrong.

This brings us then to our text for today, from Mark's Gospel, chapter 8:

"If any want to become My followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me."

"Here is your opportunity to be heroic" Jesus was saying to them. "Here is your call to go where few have gone before....deny yourself...take up a cross and follow Me". Three thoughts to share that come to me from this verse.

### A CALL TO THE HEROIC

First, we need to see that the call to follow Jesus is a call to the heroic. It is not for everyone.

One thinks of that occasion when five thousand men and women as well as an unknown number of children were fed by Jesus, but when He later spelled out what following Him meant, this crowd was quickly reduced to only twelve men and a small number of women. Not everyone who heard Him speak was willing to "rise up and follow"....to pay the price of discipleship. Following Jesus was not for the faint of heart. It was a call to the heroic. And heroes have always been in short supply....in every age and in every time and place on earth.

I remember once reading that Sydney, Australia was settled as a penal colony for Great Britain and that convicts were sent down there, half a world away from England where they were completely isolated. When these same convicts had served out their time, they were free to leave Australia and return to England, or go anywhere in the world for that matter. But the problem was that there was no way of making a living in the penal colony. Former convicts had no resources with which to return to civilization and so they were trapped in Sydney and in this penal colony. The ocean bounded it on one side and a great range of mountains on the other. And to the north and south there were swamps and desert. There really was no escape from this desolate land.

The Governor of the colony decided that Australia would never be developed until they could find some farmland, some forests and other natural resources. And so they mounted expeditions to go beyond the mountains. And one after another, those expeditions failed. No one was able to get beyond the mountains. Finally, the Governor declared it was impossible and no more attempts would be made, and they named the mountains the "Barrier Mountains". The story continues...

In the year 1812, three very daring young men decided that nothing was impossible and they set out to conquer the Barrier Mountains. They studied every expedition and a pattern developed. All previous expeditions had followed the stream beds up the valleys to reach the pass and all of them came to a cliff that blocked the passage. But these three young men decided on another approach. They would start the climb from the top of the ridge from the very beginning and climb the hard, treacherous paths but always staying at the top or near the top of the range. They outfitted their expedition with horses, with food, with supplies and people ridiculed them:

"Why are you taking so many supplies?" they were asked.  
They replied, "We'll need them to settle on the other side!"

They climbed the hard route...the difficult paths...not the easy valleys the others had taken. They climbed the little hills and ridges at first.... leading them to the more difficult mountain peaks later. At long last, they reached the highest peak and gave it a name - Mount York. From that peak they could see beyond the range to the rolling valleys, to the rich land and to all of the forests beyond. Australia was now open for settlement.

Is it not true that there is seldom any progress in any land or in any new venture until someone heroic comes along. I like to think of Jesus as a hero....opening a new kind of frontier....indeed a frontier far more significant than the settling of Australia. His new frontier was the reign of God in every heart.

To bring the Good News of that Kingdom of right relationships to the world would require both men and women who would lay aside their own priorities in life and immerse them in His priorities. Only those who were also heroic would respond to the call of Christ.

"IF anyone....would be My disciple" said Jesus....oh, that word "IF" can be a very big word....the call to follow Jesus is a call to the heroic.

#### A CALL TO SELF-DENIAL

It is also a call to self-denial. Finish the verse. You know it. "IF anyone would be My disciple, let him DENY himself..." Let him deny himself...or herself. Do you know what it means to deny yourself? Have you ever denied yourself? If you were blessed in having a loving mother or father, then you know a little about self-denial. If you have ever been a parent...you know a little about self-denial. It goes with the territory.

In his book, Turning Point, Glen Plashin describes an event that took place during his senior year in college back in the midst of the Great Depression. His family did not have money for tuition....for the first quarter at Northeast Missouri State where he was enrolled. All they needed was twenty dollars his father said to him,

"Don't worry, Son....we'll go to the bank and I'll sign a note with you. We'll get the money..."

The next morning they went to the bank, but the bank turned them down...without collateral there were to be no loans and there were no exceptions. They

tried some individuals who were known to lend money for good causes, but again it was the same: no collateral, no loan. It looked bleak and uncertain as to whether he would get to return to college for his final year, but...

The day before he was to return, a big truck backed up to their house and two men laid down some boards from the truck to the front porch. Glen wasn't there for what took place and he heard about it afterward. If there was anything in the world his mother loved...other than family and Jesus...it was her Gulbranson piano. It was the only decent piece of furniture in their home, but the men rolled it out of their house, on to the boards and into the truck. The driver reached into the pocket of his overalls, pulled out some bills, handed Glen's mother a twenty dollar bill, then a ten and a five. With that, they got into their truck and drove off with the pride of his mother's life.

His father threw his arms around her....and she cried and cried. That night his mother couldn't even talk about it, so his father told him...."Son, you can go back to college tomorrow...your mother sold her piano." And then he handed Glenn the money. Afterwards Glen thought, "Boy...that's love like God's love". He never forgot it. God's most precious possession was His only Son....and yet He gave Him up to be disgraced and crucified so that we could learn to love like that. And when Jesus issued the call to those who would follow Him...to deny themselves...He was asking no more of them than He was willing to ask or give Himself.

#### A CALL TO FOLLOW HIM

First, the call to Christ is a call to the heroic that is there in all of us. Second, the call to Christ is also a call to practice some self-denial - for Him. And third, the call to follow Him is a call to do just that - to follow Him. Hear His words,

"If any want to become My followers...let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me!"

You ask: well what kind of life does the disciple of Jesus live? That's not difficult to answer. The disciple of Jesus is to live as Jesus would live if He were our contemporary. That is, the call to follow Him is a call to "walk in His shoes". It is to live out the life of love that Jesus lived long ago. It is to avoid the enticement of exclusiveness....to rule out others, to leave them outside the circle. Remember that scene in Mark when the disciples came and told Jesus that there was a man casting out demons in His name...and they were upset and said to Him, "Lord...he is not one of us." Jesus set them straight, believe me....saying, "He who is not against Me, is for Me."

Let me close with a story that touched me that I came across recently. John Sherrill, the roving Editor of Guideposts, was a patient in a Northern Westchester Hospital...bored and a bit depressed. The doctors had told him he was "in" for 10 days while they tried to diagnose abdominal pain. The pain had subsided...almost...and he was ready to pack his bag and leave and return home. Early one morning he was roused by a nurse checking his temperature and blood pressure and unable to fall back to sleep he got up and started walking around with an IV pole attached to him rattling beside him on tiny wheels and his Birkenstock sandals flopping on the floor. Passing the nurses' station, one of them looked up and said, "Here comes the man in the Jesus shoes". Sherrill laughed and said, "Jesus shoes?" The nurse responded..."yes...that's my husband's name for Birkenstocks". "Jesus shoes."

Sherrill tells us that he looked down at the sturdy brown sandals he was wearing....sandals with the broad bands of leather across his feet. And yes, indeed, they did look a bit like the shoes you often see on the feet of Jesus in paintings. They talked for a few minutes and listened to some of the burdens and concerns she was carrying....long hours, both wife and husband working, kids at home. Anyway, he felt less sorry for himself and continued with his walk.

With his sandals clomping along beneath him he wondered if he could turn his long days in the hospital into something of an experiment....unobtrusively walk in Jesus' footsteps while his own life got back to normal. And from that day on, he walked the corridors of that Northwern Westchester Hospital in a different mood. Most of the time he did not talk about God or pray aloud with people, but he always prayed silently. He listened with a new attentiveness. It was astonishing how often doctors and nurses and patients and visitors and cleaning staff and volunteers would bring up personal matters as he walked in his "Jesus shoes". The difference, of course was interior. Instead of focusing on his own woes, he became really concerned - like Jesus - with other people.

CLOSING

I leave you with this question: do you have on your Jesus shoes? The call to follow Christ is a call to the heroic. It is a call to deny ourselves. It is a call to put on our Jesus shoes and to walk and to live as He lived. It is a call, friend....to leap high in the air knowing that we might land on a wounded leg - a la Kerri Strug style....if that is what it takes to really live for Him. He gives us our marching orders,

"If any want to become My followers,  
let them deny themselves...take up  
their cross and follow Me."

PRAYER

Make us sensitive once again, dear Lord, to Your presence and to Your nearness in these moments. Wrestle with us in the hidden corners of our lives....down below the surface....where narrowness and meanness....lethargy and lack of commitment....lukewarmness and laziness... sometimes take hold.

Grant us in these moments a vision of what it means to follow You...to be a faithful disciple...to go out on a limb...in Your name....to make a difference and to soeak Your word. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.

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