WHEN HEARTS ARE BRAVE AGAIN AND ARMS ARE STRONG

This is a Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ted Rust.
It is based on Psalm 56:13, Hebrews 11-12, Psalm 46, Matt. 18:21-35.

When the Japanese bombers appeared in the skies over Pearl Harbor on the morning of December 7, 1941, the U.S. military was completely unprepared for the devastating surprise attack, which dramatically altered the course of World War 2, especially in the Pacific Theater.
A man named Floyd Welch was there that day and he stepped up and did what had to be done. He pulled 33 survivors to safety from the ship known as the USS Oklahoma. Floyd Welch passed away peacefully at his home in Connecticut recently. He was 99 years old.

By using blueprints of the Oklahoma, so as to not burn into a fuel void, Welch began his long and extremely difficult process of cutting holes thru the bottom steel plates of the Ship. He wrote this later: **"When we could see the Japanese planes coming to attack, we would try to find cover. We would cut near where we heard the trapped crewman tapping. In all, I believe 33 men from the Oklahoma were rescued through these holes."**
Floyd is survived by his wife Marjorie, 6 children, 13 grandchildren and 10 great grandchildren. May we thank God for heroes like Floyd Welch. He walks in the light of God's grace.

Psalm 56:13 says:
"You have delivered my soul from death – that I may walk in the light of life."

We have a young man who is a member of our Church who reminds me of Floyd Welch. His name is **Eric Edmundson** and he also served our country with great honor and courage. He was injured severely years ago as a soldier, but continues to inspire the rest of us. Eric inspires us by the way he works daily exercising and lifting weights, painting, fishing, and hunting and caring for his wife and 2 children.
Eric has made a tremendous recovery from his injuries and is a valuable member of our Church and Community.

Psalm 56:13 seems to be written especially for him since God delivered him from certain death—that he may now walk in the light of life. Everyone in our congregation believes that Eric is a hero, but we also think that his wife Stephanie, sister Anna and also his parents Ed and Beth are heroes. The loving and devoted way they help him live a good and normal life is what heroes do. We thank God for **heroes like Floyd, Eric, Stephanie, Anna, Beth and Ed Edmundson.**

We are living in a time that is hard on heroes. People today seem to enjoy showing the bad qualities of people. Children used to admire baseball, basketball, or other sport stars, but today we are told more about their problems and mistakes than their accomplishments. The players themselves write books and go on TV to criticize their coaches or team members.

We used to think that many mothers wanted their son or daughter to grow up to become president of the United States. But presidents and political leaders are not the heroes they once were. Political leaders today are regularly caught up in the middle of various national controversies and won't work with members of the other party. Former employees can get rich publishing private diaries about the president and other famous people. Gossip sells better than heroism.

Yet, most of us—especially children—need heroes. We need Christian persons who impress us in the right way and whose example we can follow. **In Hebrews chapters 11 and 12 we have a whole section on heroes who were great examples of faith. Some of these Bible heroes experienced outstanding victories, even over the threat of death. But others were severely mistreated, tortured, and even killed. Having a steadfast faith in God does not guarantee a happy & easy life.**
On the contrary—our faith almost guarantees us some form of abuse from the world. While we are on earth, we may never see the purpose of our suffering. **But we know that God loves us. We know that God will keep his promises to us. This is the Gospel.**

Many people today have a big issue with "**pain.**" When suffering occurs, they say: "**Why me?**" They feel as if God deserted them. Some accuse God of not being as dependable or loving as he should be. The truth is, however, **we are living on earth—not in heaven**. In reality we **live in an evil and sinful world filled with lies, suffering, and pain even for people of God. But God is still in control. God allows some Christians to become martyrs for the faith and God allows others to survive persecution and dangerous situations.**

Rather than asking: "**Why me**?" It may be more helpful to ask: "**Why not me?" Our Christian faith and the values of this world are on a collision course.** If we expect pain and suffering to come at times, we will not be shocked when this happens. I believe we can also take comfort in knowing that Jesus also suffered. **Jesus understands our fears, our weaknesses, and our disappointments.** Jesus promised never to leave us in Matthew 28:20. Jesus even prays to God the Father on our behalf. **In times of uncertainty, pain, persecution, or suffering, we are called by the Bible to trust confidently in Christ.**

If I were to ask you if you had any heroes – what would you say? Would you talk about your Mom or Dad or perhaps a grandparent? Would you talk about a teacher or coach you simply loved and admired? Would you talk about your sister or brother as a hero? Is your hero your best friend or someone you work with**? On Friday Sept. 11th we all remembered the 3,000 people who will killed by terrorists 19 years ago. Those killed in the attacks included 343 fire fighters and 60 policeman. These heroes should never be forgotten.**
Martin Luther is another example of a hero. Between 1527 and 1529, Luther wrote and composed his famous hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Luther based the text of this hymn on Psalm 46: "**God is our refuge and strength a very present help in trouble."** Martin Luther knew all about trouble. He had been "thrown out" of the Church and declared an outlaw by the Emperor.

The bubonic plague had hit Germany hard just like this Corona Virus is hitting us hard right now. Luther's precious 7-month-old-daughter, Elisabeth, had died. How awful this must have been for him and his wife. Civil unrest resulted in the Peasants War, which was brutally crushed by the nobility. Like us today—Martin Luther lived in uncertain times. Like us today—Martin Luther was called by God to step up and do what needed to be done.

We are in the middle of a pandemic. We have been sheltering in place for 6 months. Thousands have been newly awakened to racial inequity in our society and are marching for change. Education has been disrupted. Our Lutheran Worship Services have taken on new forms using online services and even drive through Holy Communion. Our homes have become offices and class rooms. The world we live in is changing and the rate of change in the past 6 months is unprecedented

Psalm 46:11 says:
"**The Lord of hosts is with us;**
The God of Jacob is our refuge."

God loves us. God will be faithful to God's promises and to God's people. God is a mighty fortress who fights by our side with weapons of the Spirit. Luther ends his famous hymn by saying:

"**Were they to take our house, goods, honor, child, or spouse, though life be wrenched away, they cannot win the day. The Kingdom's ours forever!"**

I like heroes. I need heroes. Towering over all heroes is Jesus Christ our Lord. I don't understand why more people don't make Jesus their hero instead of a musician, political leader, athlete, movie star or someone else.

Today's Gospel Reading is from Matthew 18:21-35. When Peter asks about the limits of forgiveness, Jesus responds with a parable that suggests **human forgiveness should mirror the unlimited mercy of God. While our capacity to forgive others may be limited—our Lord's well of forgiveness is deep enough for all people and all kinds of sin.** When we find ourselves struggling to extend forgiveness to others perhaps we could return to the baptismal font. This is an overflowing well of love. Drawing from this water, we draw from the limitless supply of God's forgiveness. Remembering our baptism, we are reminded not only that "**we are forgiven**," but that God's will is for us to become "**agents of forgiveness**" in our broken world.

Ben Carson says:

"Your job is not to judge. Your job is not to figure out if someone deserves something. Your job is to lift the fallen, to restore the broken, and to heal the hurting."

Jesus can lead us from guilt to forgiveness, from evil to good, from weakness to strength, and from death to life. Hebrews 12:1-3 says:

"Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus.....Let us not grow weary or lose heart."

When we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus we will soon discover freedom, abundance, and new strength. What is God's Word saying to you today? I truly believe that God's Word is saying this to you:

- Healing is on the way.
- Your sins are forgiven – now become an agent of forgiveness yourself.
- Don't be discouraged or give up.
- God has some special blessings for you this week.
- It's not too late for you.
- Your dreams can come to pass.
- New and better relationships are coming to you.
- New opportunities are on the way because the Lord of hosts is with you.
- Problems you are now facing are going to turn around soon.
- Something better is coming.
- People you live and work with may keep giving you bad news but today God only has good news for you.
- All your sins are forgiven. You are loved.
- Things are starting to turn around in your life.
- You are still surrounded by heroes who are doing amazing things.
- For God's sake – you are even becoming a hero!

And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
And hearts are brave again and arms are strong.
Allelluia! Allelluia!