

“Everyday Heroes”

Ruth 2:4-12 ¹

On January 28, 1945, 121 hand-picked U.S. troops slipped behind enemy lines in the Philippines. Their mission was to march undetected for thirty rugged miles to rescue 513 POW's, some of whom were the last survivors of the infamous Bataan Death March. The Japanese had begun executing their prisoners as the Allies closed in on their positions, and only hours separated these POW's from death.

That rescue operation became the most famous rescue of World War II, and one of those 121 “Ghost Soldiers,” as they’ve become known, was named Bob Anderson. Bob was an unassuming retired businessman who went to church with my parents and lived in the same retirement center that they did. **Bob Anderson** was a true hero.²

In September, 2006, a high school senior in Green Bay, Wisconsin named **Matt Atkinson** learned about a dark secret from three of his friends. They told him of their plan to initiate a Columbine-style attack on their school, during which they would ignite bombs near bathrooms, set fire to exits, and then shoot any of the 1,500 students and staff they didn't like.

These confessions created a crisis of conscience for Matt. Although the threats were gravely serious, he wasn't at all sure they were genuine. Could he risk getting his friends into major trouble over what might turn out to be a really bad joke? In order to gain clarity, he spent the evening talking the situation through with his mother.

The following morning—one day before his friends had scheduled their attack—Matt shared his knowledge with the school's assistant principle. Law enforcement officials immediately intervened. After taking the three would-be attackers into custody, police searched their homes, and what they found was a shocking confirmation of the intended assault: suicide notes, a large cache of weapons, ammunition, camouflage clothing, helmets, and gas masks.

When the news of the foiled attack became public, Matt Atkinson was lauded as a hero—a title that he consistently downplayed. “Do the right thing,” he said. “That’s all I can say: do the right thing. Tell somebody. I didn't do it for fame. I had fear for the lives of my fellow students and staff at my school.” Matt Atkinson is a hero.³

I answered the phone one Friday afternoon about a decade ago and an African-American man asked me, “Are you the David Stancil who is pastor of the First Baptist Church of Bristol?” When I said I was, he continued, “My name is Daldred Mason, and I'm actually looking for your wife, Jill. She and I were in the same class at Southwest High School in Atlanta in the 60's. Those were the days of desegregation, as I'm sure you remember, and Jill was the only white person who was ever nice to me at school. I've looked you up on the Internet so that I can thank her for her kindness.” **Jill Martin**—my sweetheart—is a hero.

Ken Reinhardt was a friend of mine in Louisville. Ken was a banker—now retired—and he was the teacher of a booming young couples Sunday School class. Ken was a senior at Little Rock Central High School in 1957 when President Eisenhower sent the 101st Airborne from Ft. Campbell, Kentucky to ensure the enrollment of nine black teenagers in a formerly segregated school. As Jill would do in Atlanta a few years later, Ken was one of the few white students who befriended the “Little Rock Nine.”

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 11, 2019.

² Hampton Sides, *Ghost Soldiers: The Epic Account of World War II's Greatest Rescue Mission* (New York: Anchor, 2001).

³ Associated Press, "Student Talks of Breaking Up Bomb Plot," msnbc.com (9-21-06)
<https://wtaq.com/news/articles/2016/sep/13/10th-anniversary-of-east-hs-plot-arrests/>

Although Ken and his family endured harassment and threats in those long-ago days, Ken hadn't thought much about what he'd done through the years since. On the fortieth anniversary of that famous confrontation, students at the Uniontown, Kentucky High School were doing research on the Little Rock Nine, and Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Nine, told the students about Ken's kindness. The media picked up the story all over the country, and Ken Reinhardt became recognized across America as a hero.

In January, 2007, a construction worker named **Wesley Autrey** was waiting for the subway in New York City with his two daughters when a man named Cameron suffered a seizure and fell helplessly into the path of an oncoming train. With only seconds to spare, Wesley grabbed Cameron and rolled with him into a drainage ditch between the tracks. The train thundered past only inches above them, and amazingly, neither was hurt.

Now known as "The Hero of Harlem," Wesley simply says, "I just did it because I saw someone in distress. Someone needed help." The executive director of the Transit Authority saw it differently: "Wesley Autrey's rescue was a death-defying act of bravery. . . . He was at the right place at the right time and he did the right thing."⁴

"He was at the right place at the right time and he did the right thing." That's the story the second chapter of Ruth tells, too.

Naomi's return to Bethlehem created quite a stir, as did the arrival of her Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth. We're not told much about their situation, but in the absence of life insurance, Social Security, or male breadwinners, Ruth and Naomi must surely have lived on the edge of poverty.

Ruth and Naomi's arrival coincided with the beginning of the barley harvest (Ruth 1:22), and this offered the two widows some hope for food. When Moses had established God's law for Israel several centuries before, he repeatedly told them, "*When you harvest the crops of your land, do not harvest the grain along the edges of your fields, and do not pick up what the harvesters drop. Leave it for the poor and the foreigners living among you. I am the Lord your God*" (Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19).

Naomi seems to have been too old for such gleaning, but she had obviously told Ruth about this generous custom. *So one day Ruth said to Naomi, "Let me go out into the fields to gather leftover grain behind anyone who will let me do it." So Ruth went out to gather grain behind the harvesters. And as it happened, she found herself working in a field that belonged to Boaz, a relative of her father-in-law, Elimelech* (Ruth 2:2-3).

Although the work was menial, tiring, and degrading, a public announcement of destitution, Ruth gave herself to it with a will. She wasn't ashamed to admit her need, or of working to meet it. Ruth had entered poverty on purpose, because of her love for Naomi, and now a divine prompting caused her to choose a field belonging to a man named Boaz in which to begin her work.

As the morning wore on, Boaz arrived at the field where Ruth was working as he made the rounds of his properties. Bethlehem wasn't a very big place, and everybody knew everybody else, so Boaz saw immediately that there was a stranger working in his field. "*Who is that girl over there?*" he asked his foreman.

⁴ Verena Dobnik, "NYC Subway Savior Showered with Gifts," *Associated Press*, January 4, 2007; Jill Gardiner, "Subway Hero Gets the Red-Carpet Treatment," *The New York Sun*, January 5, 2007.

“She’s the young woman from Moab who came back with Naomi. She asked me this morning if she could gather grain behind the harvesters. She’s been hard at work ever since, except for a few minutes’ rest over there in the shelter” (2:5-7).

Boaz knew about Ruth, but he had apparently never seen her before. He went over and said to her, *“Listen, my daughter. Stay right here with us when you gather grain; don’t go to any other fields. Stay right behind the women working in my field. . . . I have warned the young men not to bother you. And when you are thirsty, help yourself to the water they have drawn from the well.”*

Ruth fell at his feet and thanked him warmly. “Why are you being so kind to me?” she asked. “I am only a foreigner.” Ruth was indeed a foreigner, an immigrant, and no ordinary one at that. She was a Moabite, a nation descended from Abraham’s nephew Lot, and there was about as much love between Israel and Moab as there is today between Israel and the Palestinians (Deuteronomy 23:3-6).

Though she came from a despised people, Ruth’s faithfulness and her diligence caused her positive reputation to precede her. Thinking about that caused me to remember a story my Dad used to tell about a famous American who also arrived as an immigrant of sorts, but whose faithfulness and diligence opened doors that only character and integrity can open. The story is about Dr. **George Washington Carver**.

As you may remember, Dr. Carver was what we would call today the first biochemical engineer. He almost single-handedly revolutionized Southern agriculture, and he received world acclaim for his contributions to agricultural chemistry. Although this would be his eventual achievement, George Washington Carver was born into slavery near the end of the Civil War, and was soon orphaned.⁵

As I remember the story, George had an insatiable love for learning, and wanted desperately to gain an education. When he applied for admission to a certain school, the headmaster gave him a rather nasty stable or some such space to clean up as a test of his character. George cleaned the room not once, not twice, but three times, and the headmaster was so impressed with his work that George gained admission and moved forward toward the eventual mastery of his field. That’s what Ruth did, too.

As he connected Ruth’s reputation with her face, her humility, her faithfulness, and her diligence caused Boaz to cross several social barriers to be kind to her. *“Yes, I know you are a foreigner,” he said. “But I also know about the love and kindness you have shown your mother-in-law since the death of your husband. I have heard how you left your father and mother and your own land to live here among complete strangers. May the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, reward you fully” (2:11-12).*

Because of Boaz’s instructions to his harvesters, Ruth returned home at the end of the day with much more grain than gleaners usually gathered. When Naomi learned in whose field Ruth had worked, she exclaimed, *“May the LORD bless him! He is showing his kindness to us as well as to your dead husband. That man is one of our closest relatives, one of our family redeemers” (2:20).*

God’s provision of “family redeemers”⁶ was perhaps the world’s first provision for “social security.” In an agricultural economy such as every economy was in those days, land was precious, because one obviously couldn’t grow a crop and provide for one’s family without it. Like share-croppers today, men who had no land were condemned to eking out a living, at best.

⁵ www.nps.gov/archive/gwca/expanded/gwc.htm

⁶ Also known as kinsman-redeemers, or as the *Go’el*.

I say “men who had no land” on purpose. In those days, only men could own land. When Israel conquered Canaan under Joshua, every family received a patrimony of land that passed from generation to generation. If a man died without male heirs, his brother or his next nearest male relative was supposed to marry the widow and raise up a son who would inherit the dead man’s land (Leviticus 25:25-28; Deuteronomy 25:5-10).

This was great in theory, but since there was only expense and no economic advantage to fulfilling the role of family redeemer, it was not a popular practice, and was seldom followed. Boaz was going to choose to do this for Ruth, mainly because it was the right thing to do.

This week’s message focuses on “everyday heroes,” on men and women who do the right thing *just because it is the right thing*. The world is full of such heroes, most of whom never get medals or acclaim. These heroes just do the right thing at the right time. Heroes are people who, when faced with business or other decisions, think about what’s best for others before they think of what’s best for themselves.

Like Bob, Matt, Jill, Ken, Wesley, and George, Ruth and Boaz were “everyday heroes,” persons who “did the right thing,” and God blessed their faithfulness. Ruth shows the character potential of work, problems, family, dreams, and gratitude, while Boaz shows the power of kindness, family, and giving. The passion of Ruth’s love for Naomi shows what a powerful influence for good we can be in the lives of those in our families, even those for whom we’re “in-laws.”

Heroes are not usually “up front” people, though sometimes they are. Heroes are folks who do things that bless others, like teaching children on Sunday morning or Wednesday night so their parents can study and grow, becoming more effective Christian parents who raise more deeply grounded Christian kids who make a difference in schools and ball teams and culture for the cause of Christ.

Heroes are folks who step up to lead or to teach, though it’s a lot easier just to watch. Heroes are folks who wash dishes, clean floors, befriend the lonely, feed the hungry, and visit the sick. Heroes are folks who volunteer around town in any of a hundred ways, seeking no recognition but the Master’s “Well done!”

Two more hero stories and we’re done. Lt. Commander **Butch O’Hare** was a fighter pilot on the USS Lexington in the South Pacific. On February 20, 1942, Butch was the section leader of Fighting Squadron 3, six fighters that were sent into the air to protect the Lexington from Japanese bombers. O’Hare and his wingman spotted the enemy planes first.

The wingman’s guns jammed, though, and the other four planes were too far away, so O’Hare faced nine twin-engine Japanese bombers alone. He shot down five of them and damaged a sixth before other U.S. fighters arrived. No enemy bombs made it to the Lexington. The Medal of Honor citation calls it “one of the most daring, if not the most daring, single action in the history of combat aviation.” Butch was killed in action in 1943, and O’Hare International Airport in Chicago is named after him.

Some years earlier, there was a man in Chicago known as “**Easy Eddie**.” Easy Eddie was mobster Al Capone’s lawyer, and in return for keeping Capone out of jail, Easy Eddie lived like a king on a huge estate. Though he got Capone off for murder time after time, Easy Eddie’s hard heart had one soft spot—for his son. Despite his involvement with the mob, Eddie tried to teach his son right from wrong, wanting him to become a better man than his father was.

Easy Eddie eventually decided to testify against Al Capone in order to be an example for his son and to leave him with a good name. Some time later, Eddie was gunned down in his car, giving his son the ultimate gift he had to offer at the greatest price that could be paid.

What do these stories have to do with each other? Butch O'Hare was Easy Eddie's son.⁷ And, like Easy Eddie, no matter what your life has been like so far, it's never too late to become a hero.

Like most of the heroes I've mentioned this morning, you and I cannot know for sure ahead of time how we will respond to crisis situations, and when those situations come, there is no time to prepare for them. Our actions *then* reveal our character *now*. The time to prepare, to build a space in your spirit for an "everyday hero," is also now.

Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand (Ephesians 6:10-13).

⁷ <http://www.truthorfiction.com/rumors/b/butchandeddie.htm>