

be able to continue as she goes to college this fall. This congregation is now part of the network God is building for them as they become more and more disciples of Christ. We are interdependent. Our lives are bound together. And we trust that by saying yes to each other, by walking alongside each other in faith, that we are accomplishing some small piece of what God intends for the world.

Jesus called together lots of disciples and friends who became a community. All of us are part of that community, too, which is called the body of Christ. In a mystical, spiritual way, we say that Christ now lives through all those individual people, including you and me, as we serve and love. But Christ is also present in a tangible way, too. We show up with our bodies, like the women at Hot Mess Express do, to help and to hold other people, because we need each other. We show up with our prayers lifted to God on each other's behalf, as our community will be able to do for Amelia and Landon as we all continue the journey from here.

Deborah showed up on the battlefield to support Barak. Jael continued the work on behalf of God's people, even as the task laid before her was unsavory and violent. It's not clear from the passage that Deborah herself was a fabulous judge or that she or anyone else was the hero of this story. After the people had been freed from the enemy by these shared efforts, Deborah and Barak sang a song. Their song didn't just praise the warriors or Jael; it praised God. "Bless the Lord! I will make melody to the Lord!" The people gave of themselves, in community, in order to serve God and God's people.

Maybe you saw headlines about the Turkish Olympian who won a silver medal for pistol shooting. Most of his fellow competitors were decked out in special gear, eye coverings, visors, major ear protection, and clothing to soften reverberations from the weapon. So Yusuf Dikec stood out for wearing a t-shirt, a simple pair of foam ear plugs, and shooting with one hand in his pocket. Memes went out all over the internet profiling this athlete who seemed so nonchalant and casual, even as did so well. What I saw later though, was the reminder that Dikec did not win the silver medal alone. In fact, he might not have medalled at all, except that he had a teammate. A woman, Sevval Ilayda Tarhan. In the individual event, she ranked higher than he did in a similarly sized field of competitors.¹ Tarhan wears the same t-shirt as Dikec; she has the exact same hand-in-the-pocket stance. She adds a slightly larger pair of ear coverings and a small visor. But when you see the pictures, their vibe is exactly the same. The world only lifted up the man as the hero of the story, though.

What a pity when we forget we are all part of teams, networks, or for us, a whole community of Christ. How diminished are our own lives when we fail to notice the many people and gifts that might press our broken world toward the wholeness and love God intends. So for all the feats we need to accomplish, let us listen first for God's guidance, like Deborah did. And then trust, depend on, and involve one another in the working out of God's purposes around us.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

1 <https://results.nbcolympics.com/shooting/womens-air-pistol/qualification/2684224>;
<https://results.nbcolympics.com/shooting/mens-air-pistol/qualification/2684206>

August 11, 2024

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

"A Web of Heroes"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Judges 4:4-10; 5:1-10

Do you have a hero? How about a she-ro? I don't mean a person who is superhuman. But is there someone who inspires you and urges you to be more faithful, more courageous, more joyful, or more dedicated? We're coming off the Olympic Games, which is always amazing to watch. Many of us may elevate the powerful athletes we see to hero status: Simon Biles, Katie Ledecky, Noah Lyles. These athletes' work ethic is unmatched. Watching them makes me want to do a few more reps when I lift those weights or a couple more minutes pushing the pedals on the bike. But one part of the Olympics that I like best are the athlete profiles. When a reporter shares a segment about the athlete at their home, what they're training is like, what obstacles they've overcome. I know all that is designed to pull on my heartstrings, and it works. But the other thing those profiles show is the network of people who make it possible for that one athlete to succeed.

This year I saw the profile of U.S. gymnast Suni Lee. While attending Auburn University last year, Lee got really sick. She gained 40 pounds in two weeks, could barely walk, and certainly could not compete. She went home to Minnesota where doctors diagnosed her with two chronic and rare kidney conditions. After a lot of treatment and time in the hospital, she started to get better. Lee went back to training and, in a matter of months, worked her way back up to qualify for the Paris Olympics, where she won two gold medals and a bronze. Think of the network of people who made that journey since the illness possible: the coaches and trainers who helped her when she got sick and worked with her to let her return. The doctors and nurses and hospital staff who figured out her physical concerns and certainly supported her on what must have been an roller coaster journey. Her family who walked alongside her for support. Lee is the face we see and the person we celebrate. But for her, and for any person doing a courageous thing, there is almost always a much wider network of people who make it all possible.

My dear Old Testament professor from seminary, Denis Olson writes, "Human culture often worships singular human heroes. Judges 4 offers another way—interdependence and shared responsibility in reaching a common goal. God works by creating a network of different and often unlikely human agents in order to accomplish the purposes of God." As we kick off this series about people

in the Bible who courageously served God, particularly women, it seems fitting to be clear that God rarely calls forth individual heroes. God especially calls people together, to do God's work and live into God's purposes.

Groups of people tend to be messy, though. Look at most families you know. Or organizations you're part of, whose mission you love, but that tend to be run poorly or function in a chaotic way. (The organization of the church is not exempt from that, of course.) This story in Judges illustrates it pretty well. God's people were a mess throughout this time in history. The people, called Israel, kept falling into sin. They would call out for God to save them and a new leader, called a judge, would emerge with all the promise and hope that brought. But then things would fall apart again, the leader usually faltered, some punishment might happen, and they'd do it all over again. Deborah was a judge, though she would not function alone. The Bible also calls her a prophet, a wife, and a mother in Israel. Like many of us, Deborah had many different roles. Maybe those roles helped her gather other people to serve God alongside her! As a judge, she sat under her palm tree and decided difficult matters for the people. She knew that her people were oppressed and under threat from the nearby army of Sisera. As she went about her work, God spoke to her and urged her to call on a commander in the army named Barak. When he arrived, she told him to prepare for battle against Sisera. She promised that God would support Barak and help him defeat Sisera on the battlefield.

A network of people was starting to grow. First Deborah, then Barak. Barak himself was nervous, though. He didn't seem to trust this pronouncement from God. Commentators and Bible-readers have often written him off as a coward who had little faith in God. Maybe. But I kind of love the fact that he wanted Deborah to go with him into battle. He didn't ask for another army or more weapons, just the support of this judge, prophet, mother and wife. Deborah knew God's word was true, so she promised to go.

As a prophet speaking on behalf of God, she told Barak one other thing though. He was not going to be the hero of the battle. The enemy, Sisera, would die at the hand of a *woman*. Reading this, we immediately think, "oh, it must be that Deborah herself will be the final hero." But no, God's network will grow again. Yet another woman, Jael, will be the one to kill Sisera. Her contribution was a violent and final one. The story says she put a sharp tent peg through Sisera's temple to bring about his end.

We cannot condone any of the violence and fighting in the story. And yet we also look to see how God was at work despite this violence that we wish didn't exist. God was seeking to save God's people from their enemy, represented by Sisera at that time. God was calling forth different people, in very different life situations, to lead this nation who was struggling to live in God's ways. God chose to use two women, who were not the usual suspects to do so, along with a man who seemed hesitant to do his job. God worked through an unlikely group, a network, to rescue the people once again. God chose to call on the gifts of many people, urging them to work toward a common cause. A messy community, even

a loose network, demonstrates strength and flexibility that one person alone usually lacks.

We see the power of networks in the world all the time. But our world tends to get caught up on the singular heroes and forgets all the people who make such success and transformation possible. We also forget that networks and community—those are values of our faith. This is one reason Presbyterians don't have bishops; we have committees and boards and groups of people who come together to discern the will of the Spirit and make decisions as a body. We believe that when we depend on each other and share the responsibility, we are more likely to discern God's intentions for the world than if we were trying to figure it out on our own.

I have a friend who has gotten involved with a local organization called Hot Mess Express. It's a group of women who try to help other women through times of crisis or transition by swooping in to take care of cleaning, organizing, and offering a fresh start. My friend helped out with a recent 'mission,' as they call it, for a mom who was recently divorced. Once this mom became a single mother, she reported that she lost a bit of herself. Her motivation to keep things up around the house plummeted, while her anxiety increased. When the Hot Mess Express team showed up at her house, things were in disarray. Not just normal clutter, but piles of stuff and dishes everywhere, with no end in sight. The team comes in without judgment or shame. It's just a group of other women who know how much the weight of things can press down on people; how quickly life can start to spiral out of control. So the team scrubbed, dusted, and vacuumed her office, the kids' room, the living room and kitchen. They found a place for all the stuff, got rid of tons of things and made space for the treasures that turned up. There was no one hero who saved the day. There was just a small network of people who wanted to bring blessing and new life to a neighbor in need. This huge gift has helped the mom who was the recipient turn in a new direction and begin again. Hot Mess Express is not a faith-based organization. But surely the purposes of God to serve the common good are being lived out through the members and their missions.

In a few minutes we're going to celebrate two baptisms. You may not know the young people being baptized and so I'm delighted to introduce them to you today, Landon Fraser and Amelia Fraser. Landon and Amelia's grandmother, Janet Taylor, has had a long relationship with this congregation. They and their family live out in Wixom, but when they mentioned to Janet that they were interested in getting baptized, she knew just where to send them—right here among us. Janet was part of her grandkids' network, for sure. But also part of God's network of people, working toward God's purposes. God has already been working in Landon and Amelia's lives. Landon's journey has come through an interest in the stories of the Bible—in reading for himself the words of scripture and seeing and hearing God's actions through it. Amelia's journey has come through prayer, praying with friends, lifting their concerns to God, which she will