

“How to Be An Action Hero”

Mark 3:13-19

Sermon Series: STEPS Week 3

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The Woodside Church

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Well friends, I can finally reveal my secret identity. I, Doug Hoglund, your pastor, am also an “Action Hero.” I know you’ve been suspecting it all along. It’s true. To prove it I have my own line of action heroes. Thirty years ago, when I transitioned from Associate Pastor at Lenape Valley Church to Senior Pastor here at Woodside, my friends gave me a parting gift: my own Action Hero. It reads, “Doug from Church Action Figure: A New Adventure!!! The new Doug action figure preaches, quotes Scripture, wails on electric guitar and more! He’s a living legend. Now available in senior pastor version only!” When I showed this to someone here he said, “You look like one of the Village People.” If you think that’s bad, years ago there was an organist who paid me a compliment. She said, “When you preach you remind me of a superhero.” “Which one? Batman, Superman, Ironman?” “No,” she replied, “Mighty Mouse.”

How do you get to be a real action hero? Usually, in the Kingdom of Comic Books, you have to be rich, strong, powerful, beautiful, have secret powers and wield weapons. And, I suppose, at some point, and Action Hero should do some *action*. For the last thirty years my action figure hasn’t done anything. In the Kingdom of God it’s different. Action Heroes don’t have to be powerful, popular or pumped up. Jesus uses ordinary people like us to do extraordinary things.

In Chapter 3 of Mark, Jesus chooses what seems like a dozen anti-action heroes. There’s a foursome of smelly fishermen, a corrupt taxman, a rebel with too much cause, a few cynics, a bunch of no name underachievers and a traitor. They don’t appear to be a strike force of supermen, the vanguard of an earth turning, sin shattering revolution. Tim Hansel suggests Jesus should have used a Management Consultant service before He made His selection. The final assessment might sound like this:

To: Jesus, Son of Joseph, Woodcrafter’s Carpenter Shop, Nazareth 25922

From: Jordan Management Consultants

Dear Sir: Thank you for submitting the resumes of the twelve you picked for managerial positions in your new organization. After analyzing their test results and conducting interviews with each, it is the staff’s opinion that most of your nominees lack the background, education and vocational aptitude for the type of enterprise you are undertaking. They do not have the team concept. We recommend that you continue your search for persons of experience in managerial ability and proven capability.

Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and given to fits of temper. Andrew has absolutely no qualities of leadership. The two brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, place personal interest above company loyalty. Thomas demonstrates a questioning attitude which undermines morale. We feel it is our duty to tell you Matthew is blacklisted by the Greater Jerusalem Better Business Bureau; Simon the Zealot has radical leanings.

One of the candidates, however, shows great potential. He is a man of ability and resourcefulness, meets people well, has a keen business mind, and contacts in high places. He is highly motivated, ambitious, and responsible. We recommend Judas Iscariot as your controller and right-hand man. All of the other profiles are self-explanatory. We wish you every success in your new venture.¹

You might think that assessment is a little harsh. But remember: the twelve almost always miss the point of Jesus' parables, argue about who is the greatest in the gang, tells children to go away, try to send hungry crowds home and even offer to call down fire on their enemies. And when Jesus most needs them? They run away. Action Heroes? More like Action Zeros.

Jesus saved the world without their assistance. He could have changed the world without the twelve. They are not important. But the fact Jesus chose a small group of twelve is. From the very beginning, Jesus demonstrates this truth: if you want to follow me, you need to be in community, you must be in a small group. Throughout history, the Holy Spirit renews the Church through small groups of believers who pray, study Scripture and serve in mission. We learn better, grow stronger and accomplish more when we belong to a small fellowship.

In the recent survey we took, many of you responded that if God had his way in 3 to 5 years we would be a larger church with more disciples. The only way the church can grow larger is if it grows smaller at the same time. The bigger this congregation becomes, the more we need everyone in a small group. When you belong to a small group Bible study of 3 to 12 people, you feel the support and love of this church no matter how large it grows. Why are small groups so essential? What do they give you?

First: Small groups help you **Plug Into God's Power**. Who gathered the twelve, ate with them, taught them, prayed with them, pulled them out of the swirling sea? Jesus. In a small group you meet Jesus. Now you may say, "Sure, the apostles saw Jesus, but we can't see Jesus in the flesh today." Oh no? Jesus Himself makes this bold promise,

Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them. Matthew 18:19-20

When small groups gather, Jesus is there through the Holy Spirit, in the flesh of other believers. After all, we are called "the Body of Christ." When we join together and pray according to God's will, we plug into the presence and power of God.

After I became a Christian in ninth grade, I went to a Christmas party at a youth advisor's home. In other rooms teens listened to music, ate chips and talked. But in one room a small group did something I'd never heard of called "prayer and praise." Until then, the only prayer I knew was the Lord's Prayer and "God is great, God is good and we thank you for our food." Here were people praying and praising God in their own

¹ Tim Hansel, Eating Problems for Breakfast, Word Publishing, 1988, pp. 194-195

words, out loud and out of order. It seemed very un-Presbyterian. Yet as I started to pray with them, I felt, for the first time, the presence of God descend on me. Why do I ask you to pray out loud, in your own words? I want you to know the joy of meeting Jesus. It can happen anywhere. Jesus guarantees He'll meet you in a small group of believers.

Second, a small group helps you **Find God's Family**. After three years of following Jesus, after seeing His death and resurrection, the twelve are welded together with bonds stronger than death. When Jesus ascends, they stay together as a family.

Now I love coffee hour. No church is complete without a coffee hour. We Presbyterians have three sacraments: Baptism, the Lord's Supper and coffee and donuts. During a children's sermon a pastor asked, "Why do we have coffee hour after church?" One child replied, "To wake people up for the drive home." As much as I love coffee hour, Christian fellowship is so much more. It is a bond that is as strong as, and sometimes closer than, your family ties. In Mark 3 you will see even Jesus had trouble with His family. They thought He was out of His mind. Yet later, we find His mother, brothers and sisters in the new family called Church.

When Henry Cloud, co-author of *Boundaries*, was four, he developed serious leg disabilities. While recovering with leg braces, the doctor told his parents to make him do things for himself and not carry him. It was heart wrenching to watch the little boy struggle and to hear thoughtless adults criticize his parents for putting him through this pain. His mother was so sensitive she had difficulty sending the dog out in the rain.

I can only imagine what it was like for her to let a child struggle through things she could have helped with. So, years later, I asked her how she did it. 'Every day, when I had to do something I just could not face doing,' his mother replied, 'I would call Emmett, cry my eyes out, and listen to her tell me I had to do it. She would help me through it each time. It was awful.' Emmett was my mother's best friend, a wonderful Christian woman. My mother discovered that by herself she could not do what was required of her. But with support she could.²

In the arms of a small group, you find God's family.

Third, small groups help you **Learn God's Lessons**. The word "disciples" means "a learner." Many are afraid to join a small group because they don't want others to discover how little they know about the Bible. Let me tell you a secret: *nobody* knows much about the Bible. Moreover, the purpose of small group Bible studies is to help you learn God's Word. Jesus used parables to teach his disciples in a big group. Yet the twelve always wait until they are away from the crowd, in a smaller group, inside a house, to say, "Master, we have no idea what you are talking about." You will learn more about Scripture in a small group than even what you get from a sermon.

Fourth, a small group will **Mold You for God's Mission**. After three years, their training was over. It was time for Jesus to launch His small group into the world.

² Henry Cloud, *How People Grow*, (Zondervan, 2001).

In all four Gospels, we hear Jesus say, “Go!” The most famous is the Great Commission:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. Matthew 28:19-20

That first small group scattered to form a multitude of small groups. They worshiped, shared fellowship, taught Jesus’ teachings, and fulfilled God’s mission. These small groups and house churches faced intense opposition and persecution. Yet without the benefit of buildings, Bibles, or the internet these small groups brought the mighty Roman Empire to its knees...in prayer...not with war and violence but with love and grace. They are action heroes and heroines because Jesus works through them. No matter where these small groups go, Jesus is with them. He will be with us always, to the very end of the age.

I see small groups go out on several missions. They fix up the homes of single parents, work in food pantries and shelters and with Habitat. They purchase baby clothes and accessories for parents too poor to outfit their newborns. They write letters to soldiers and serve food in soup kitchens or here at Woodside at Dinner Ministry and on Code Blue nights. They visit in prisons, help those in recovery and go on mission trips. Imagine the miracles God can do through this church if every member were in a small group and every small group went on a mission. We’d be filled with real Action Heroes. Best of all people would start to get a taste of heaven here and now.

Small Groups are the Heart of Woodside. There are three ways you can join one.

1. Take Alpha – the best part of Alpha are the small group discussions where every question is welcome and every one accepted.
2. Join a Growth Group – these are Small Groups of around 12 disciples which gather weekly to study the Word, pray, support each other and serve.
3. Help me start a Microchurch – these are Small Groups of up to 6 people which typically meet out in the world with the goal of reaching those who don’t know Jesus.

When a Microchurch reaches beyond 6 it multiplies and starts a new Microchurch.

During Lent 2004, when we were starting Growth Groups with 40 Days of Purpose, one group met in my house on Thursday nights. At the beginning, many did not know each other. As we discussed the Bible, the Spirit forged us into a band of sisters and brothers. We took on the ministry of planting flowers out by the church sign. One of our members, Doris Mary Smith, didn’t like digging in the dirt because the worms made her squeamish. But she still came for moral support. We agreed to meet for six weeks and then celebrate with a potluck dinner on April 29th.

In the weeks between Easter and our scheduled dinner, Doris Mary went into the hospital. Though she looked good, the prognosis was serious. We still hoped and prayed she would be out in time for our dinner. Then the tests came back – her condition was

terminal. Through it all, she kept a smile on her face. She was completely certain that, no matter what happened, her Lord was waiting in heaven for her.

The end came swiftly. I prayed over her in ICU. Then her son Bob and daughter-in-law Lisa told Doris Mary it was all right, she didn't have to struggle. She could go to be with the Lord. And she did. Doris Mary Smith died at 4:21 p.m. on April 29th, only hours before the potluck dinner we planned to celebrate our 40 Days Small Group. As I walked into the house where our group was gathered for the celebration dinner, I had the sad task of telling them our dear sister was gone. In her honor, we broke bread and gave thanks to God for the lady who couldn't stand worms, who loved to laugh and who loved the Lord above all. Lyn said, "I feel her presence here with us." Jennifer Cole said, "Doris Mary is seeing Jesus right now!" And we knew that Jesus was also with us, right there, right then.

Friends, I may not be an Action Hero. But thanks to Jesus, I serve with heroes.