

“Essential Workers”

[Mark 1:29-39](#)

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This weekend, the NHL held their annual All-Star game – all the best players in the league gathered in one place to play games and challenges together: all the most talented hockey players in the world, doing their best to show the world how great they really are. We love watching all-stars, the best of the best, people who are so skilled and talented that no-one else can do what they do. And it’s more than just hockey players – anyone who’s rich and famous and powerful, movie stars, rock stars, athletes, billionaires, even politicians – newspapers breathlessly report on what they’re wearing and eating, their hobbies and their relationships, we act like being really, really good at one particular skill makes you exceptional in everything, it makes you an all-star, someone who can do anything.

But the thing is, when you think about it, these all-stars aren’t really that important. Sure, it’s impressive to see hockey players skating really fast, or movie stars walking the red carpet, billionaires sending rockets to the moon, all that is very impressive to watch, but if all of that disappeared tomorrow, we probably wouldn’t really notice that much. It wouldn’t affect our lives all that much. When hockey players go on strike, our lives get a little bit more boring, if you care about hockey, but that’s really about it. But when the bus drivers go on strike, our whole world shuts down. When the port workers in Vancouver go on strike, the entire continent suffers. If we learned anything from the COVID-19 pandemic, it’s that the people actually keeping our world running, the people who make the difference between society thriving and flourishing or society disintegrating, are not the all-stars, the politicians and the billionaires and the celebrities. It’s the truck drivers, the grocery store cashiers, the farm workers, the emergency room nurses – these are the essential workers, people who do the everyday, ordinary work so that we all have food to eat and electricity running to our homes and hospitals to get to when we need them. The world doesn’t really need all-stars. We need essential workers.

And this is true of the church too. Most churches, including this one, have a wall somewhere with pictures of the former and current ministers, all lined up and smiling down on you in their robes and stoles and little white collars, the “leaders of the church” Gordon and Tony and Frances and Victor and one day, Me. But the truth is, we are really not that important. Ministers come and go, but it’s the people in the pews, the people leading faith formation, visiting the sick, praying for the community, handing out food Monday after Monday, those are the essential workers of the church. Honestly if I disappeared tomorrow, I’m pretty sure that everybody would pitch in and help out and by next Sunday there’d be somebody preaching, somebody praying, the church would survive just fine. The truth is that the real essential workers are rarely the ones in the spotlight, the ones with their pictures on the wall, the ones whose names we all know. The real essential workers are the ones who keep on working even when no-one even knows they’re there.

And we meet a couple of those essential workers in our gospel reading this morning. We’re in the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark - Jesus is just getting his ministry started, and he’s been recruiting some people to join him on the important journey that’s about to begin. He’s called James and John and Simon Peter and Andrew, called them to be his disciples, called them to start fishing for people instead of fish, to become heroes of the Bible, leaders of the church. James and John and Peter and Andrew are going to become names that everyone in the church will know about - we’re going to name churches and hospitals after them, make them patron saints of countries, in honour of the great things these heroes of the faith accomplished. But before all that can happen, before James and John and Peter and Andrew can become heroes of the faith, there’s someone else for us to meet. After Jesus’ grand debut at the synagogue in Capernaum, they all head back to Simon Peter’s house for a Saturday brunch, but when they get there, there’s a problem. Their hostess, Peter’s mother-in-law, is sick with a high fever, and this is a world without modern medicine, where a high fever is a very dangerous thing indeed. And when Jesus hears that this woman is sick, he goes to her and helps her up and heals her - in an instant, the fever leaves her. And as soon as this woman is healed, the minute she’s back on her feet, what does she do? She starts to serve. Immediately, she is hard at work, providing a meal for this entire group of wandering disciples who happened

to show up at her house that day. Peter's mother-in-law doesn't get a church named after her. There is no "St. Peter's mother-in-law Day." We don't even know her name. But Jesus saw her, and loved her, and healed her, and immediately she started serving. She served Jesus and his friends and provided for their needs. She was essential.

But there's someone else in this story, someone even more essential to the success of Jesus' ministry, someone who gets even less attention than Peter's mother-in-law. Think about it. If Peter had a mother-in-law, then that means Peter had a wife. Peter was a married man, and yet in all the gospels, in all the New Testament, Peter's wife is never even mentioned once. And yet I can guarantee you that Peter's wife played a part in Jesus' ministry. I mean, just going along with your husband's crazy mid-life crisis in the first place - Honey, you'll never guess what happened at work today! I'm not going to fish for fish anymore, from now on I'm fishing for humans! - even that is heroic enough. But for all those years that Jesus and his followers were travelling around Galilee and Judea, their wives and children were travelling along with them – the disciples didn't leave their families behind to starve, they joined in with Jesus' ministry with just as much enthusiasm, just as much sacrifice, as the twelve disciples whose names make it into the gospels. Every step, every sermon, every challenge, every victory, all of that was only possible because of people like Peter's wife, serving and working in the background, making sure that the needs of this entire bustling, travelling community were met day in day out. And when you reach the end of the gospel, when all the famous disciples, James and John and Peter and Andrew, when they've all abandoned Jesus, denied even knowing him, run off to save their own skins, the only ones left with Jesus at the foot of the cross when he died are the women. The only ones who go to the tomb, see the stone rolled away, who hear the news that Jesus is alive and then go and tell the world, are the women. Women like Peter's mother-in-law, Peter's wife: unnamed, unknown, but not unimportant. They are essential.

And if you think about your life, about your journey of faith, and if you think about the people you met on that journey who made a difference for you, you led you to faith in Jesus Christ, I'm willing to bet that they weren't somebody famous. Sure, maybe someone like Billy Graham or CS Lewis played a part – preachers and writers and leaders are all part of our stories,

but the people who shape our faith the most, the people who help us to understand and experience firsthand the love and grace of Jesus Christ, they aren't people we see on TV or read about in books. They're the people who we spend our lives with, people in our own homes, our own churches, people we meet day in and day out. And their names don't get put on buildings and their pictures don't get put on walls, but they are essential, absolutely essential to the growth of the kingdom of God, they serve Jesus Christ by loving the people around them in countless little ways that end up changing the world. For me, it's a guy named Walter Lutz, this old guy at my church growing up who just decided out of the blue to be my friend when I didn't really have one, and from then on, whenever I was ready to give up on the church or give up on God, I remembered that as long as Walter was part of God's church, then there was still something good about it. I am sure that all of you can think of someone like that, someone who brought the love of God into your life when you needed it most, someone who God used to bring you deeper into his kingdom. Those are the kind of people God uses most – not the allstars, but ordinary, everyday essential workers who just keep serving, keep praying, keep teaching, keep loving each and every day.

And those are the kind of people we can be. To change the world, to change one life, you don't need to be an allstar. You don't need to write a book or preach a sermon or wear a little white collar or a long robe. All you need to do is share the love of God that's been passed on to you – receive the healing that Jesus Christ wants to pour out into your life, and then get up, and get to work serving, passing it on, sharing that love with the people closest to you. The church grows when ordinary people are filled with the healing and power of Jesus Christ, and then share that power and love with the world around them, because through their actions, through their words, through their love, extraordinary things will happen. The church grows when we recognize what is truly essential, when we see every moment of our lives as an opportunity for Christ's essential love to be shared with everyone we meet. The story of Jesus Christ is still being written, and you have a part to play – so go out into the world, and tell that story in everything you say and do. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.