

Nehemiah 2:18b-3:2, 28-32
Matthew 9:35-10:4

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333
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Thank You!

When the people of Israel arrived back in their homeland after seventy years of exile in Babylon, most likely none of them had seen their homeland before. They had all been born in exile. The city of Jerusalem was a shambles. The temple destroyed, the once impregnable city wall had holes you could drive cattle through, and the people who still inhabited the city were a people living on the edge.

But Nehemiah, himself returning from exile, had a vision from God to rebuild the city starting with its wall. In spite of serious opposition from the people who lived outside the city, he rallied the exiles and inspired each to rebuild the wall closest to where they lived. What a brilliant strategy, appealing to each household's first line of security. It was all volunteer work. Each had to find and dress the stones, rebuild the gates, and so on. They started with nothing and restored the city. As Jesus would put it five centuries later, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few, pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the vineyard." And they did. Our own beloved St. John's began with a donation of land from two Philadelphia attorneys, and gathering 10 families, created this church. It's always about volunteers who in the very act of giving themselves to a common task discover their best selves.

Angela Madsen is an extraordinary human being and an exceptional athlete. A Marine Corps veteran from Long Beach, California, she is a multiple gold medalist in track and field in her age category (she's now 45). In midlife she started rowing not just in your average grueling, physically and mentally excruciating races on relatively flat-water inland courses where, incidentally, she has collected four World Rowing Championship gold medals, Madsen also competes in long-distance ocean going coastal races. But she set her personal goals higher still. In June of 2006 with a

French colleague Angela traveled from the United States to the United Kingdom—not by plane or ship, but by rowing 3,200 miles in an open boat. This extraordinary feat has been done by only a very few people.

Now, as any rower or coach will tell you, 70-80 percent of the power in rowing comes from the legs in that long slide on the seat before the more limited power in the arms and upper body finishes the stroke. To emphasize this point, when our daughter Katherine started rowing at Conestoga High School ten years ago, I asked her how far she thought she could walk. She thought about it and said, “Pretty much indefinitely, I guess.”

“And how far do you think you could walk on your hands?” I asked .

She laughed. “Maybe two steps.” I wanted her to see how disproportionately powerful the legs are. A couple of years ago I got a taste of that when I had to use crutches for a while after hip surgery—and I had one good leg!

The special challenge in Angela Madsen’s case is that she has no use of her legs at all. She is a paraplegic, and her companion on the transatlantic row is an amputee. Fourteen years ago, while playing basketball for the U.S. Marine Corps, Angela sustained an injury that back surgery was unable to repair. She lost the use of her legs. Her life went through a series of incidents that would have destroyed the spirit of most people. After losing her job and her income she became homeless. The Department of Veterans Affairs even demanded that she give them back her wheelchair. And to cap it off, she was told by her physician that her physical condition was a waste of human life!

Angela was determined to make a difference, determined not to bow to circumstance or let life dictate to her how she should be. Now as if these personal challenges and commitments are not enough to consume every inch of her time, Angela takes that same determination and drive that she directed toward self-improvement, and directs it toward others. As a spokesperson for PVA (Paralyzed Veterans of America) she volunteers with the California chapter, visiting the newly injured in VA medical centers, speaking at hospitals, schools, universities, and at other functions to help broaden disability awareness. So she created the California Adaptive Rowing Program “for people with physical and mental challenges.” Students from regional schools volunteer with the program, and many have been inspired to pursue careers in rehabilitative medicine and adaptive physical education. “I like to inspire people to set goals not limits, she says. “I like being part of an organization that helps people realize their potential, not limitations.” That would be a wonderful sub-creed for any church. She spends so much of her life searching after those who, by circumstance, can easily become another forgotten wheelchair victim once the bloom of the veteran hero has

faded. Those whom she finds in forgotten corners of tired green VA hospital lounges, she seeks to rescue like lost sheep brought home, or lost coins, precious treasure salvaged from society's dusty floors. For her work she is the recipient of the Leo Reilly award for outstanding spirit and determination, and the "Women Who Inspire Us" award from the Amateur Athletic Foundation. This year, at close to 50, she hopes to row in the Paralympics in Beijing.

One Friday, within minutes of reading the article about Angela Madsen over lunch at the Farmer's Market, I was standing in line at the cheese counter, scanning the counter top with an eagle eye for the free samples, a copy of "World Rowing" magazine tucked under my arm. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a man, about my age, leaning on a tall walking stick, unsteady and noticeably twitching. "World Rowing," he said, eying the magazine. "You a rower?"

"No," I said, always eager to pick up a conversation on that magnificent sport, "but my daughter is."

"I have Parkinson's," he said. "I've been rowing every day for twelve years on a Concept 2" (an indoor rowing machine)." Other than the Parkinson's he looked to be in wonderful shape. And so we talked on.

What Angela Madsen and her companions have achieved, what the gentleman with Parkinson's has accomplished in the face of a debilitating disease, what our extraordinarily resourceful friends here today from Mexico—our companions in ministry—have all accomplished, is by an act of will. Each one has chosen to set aside any tendency to retreat into self-pity and discover their best-self, their astonishing potential. The power of the will to choose the good is potentially the greatest yet least utilized resource among humankind. If all other Christian doctrines were to wither on the vine, I will hold as central to my personal theology to my dying breath that we are created in the image of God. And as Jesus' incarnation made crystal clear—"I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12). To will and choose the good—"good will" is at the heart of the volunteer spirit. This is Jesus' point. This was Nelson Mandela's point when he said,

"You are a child of God.

Your playing small does not serve the world. . . .

We were born to manifest the glory of God that is within us.

It is not just in some of us, it is in everyone."

Many of us here feel that we don't have enough hours in the day to accomplish all that's on our agenda. Angela Madsen's story reminds us that it can always be otherwise. We all have the same number of hours in a day, we just use them differently. We all have opportunity to make a larger difference, a magnificent difference. We live in a world where people starve to death by the thousands each day for want of food. We spoke to this last week, noting the present escalating world food crisis has nothing to do with famine, but virtually everything to do with the redistribution of scarce grain resources from the food chain to the fuel tank in the creation of alternative fuels. Just a few days ago, outside Wilmington, I passed a man made mountain, soon, perhaps to be a golf course, made of all the food and packaging we throw away, for goodness sake. We are a long way from the kingdom of God that Jesus gave his life for 2,000 years ago!

But by God's grace we are doing much good, and can and must do more. For all that we do accomplish, I say thank you. Jesus says "Thank you," and the faceless people around the world whom we help, say "Thank you!"

Thank you for volunteering . . .

- Because, as Isaiah wrote, "If you offer your food to the hungry, and satisfy the desire of the afflicted . . . Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help and he will say, 'Here I am'."
- Thank you because volunteering makes an *immediate* difference in someone's life.
- Thank you because it gives a *human face* to human need.
- Thank you because it *accustoms the heart* to acts of compassion. 2,500 years ago Plato said, "Always be kind, for everyone is fighting a hard battle."
- Thank you because *kindness is contagious*. The beauty of volunteered good-will is that it has the capacity to grow exponentially, like Jesus' analogies of the seed—from one seed come 100, from 100 come 10,000, from ten thousand come 10,000,000, in just three seasons!
- Thank you because the best good will is often *unplanned*—it makes for senseless acts of beauty and random acts of kindness.
- Thank you for volunteering because volunteerism in the spirit of Christ is *self-transcending generosity*.

- Thank you because it costs something that *everyone can afford*, but when it is withheld it enlarges the store of human woe and suffering.
- Thank you because it *gets our mind off ourselves*, where it least needs to be.
- Thank you because it *makes neighbors and friends* of total strangers.
- Thank you because it is *what you would yearn for* if the roles were reversed.
- Thank you because *we have promised* ourselves to God, and thereby to God's people.

For all you have done and yet will do—Thank you!

Amen.