

## Hero Vs. Messiah

The Episcopal Church of the Resurrection  
Second Sunday After Epiphany  
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One special memory of my time in NYC was meeting the folk singer and activist Pete Seeger. By then he was in his early 90's and his health was failing, and he was not able to say yes to the many requests for his help that came his way. Nonetheless he volunteered to lend his name and his voice to a coalition of Church groups I was apart of. Our mission was to put on a big fundraiser for the chronically underfunded homeless shelters in NYC.

I remember how frail Pete was the night of the benefit. His beloved wife was Toshi was beside him in her wheelchair in the front. When he finally hopped onto the stage his lanky thin body hovered and wobbled for a few moments . . . we all held our breath as he got his bearings. Luckily he was able to make his wobble look like part of a planned waltz. He sat down with his famous banjo, chatted with us for a few minutes like we were all old friends, and began strumming "***If I had a Hammer.***"

Pete Seeger led such a passionate life.  
Did you ever hear what happened when he fell in love with the Hudson River in the late 1940's?

Even then, the once glorious Hudson was in pitiful shape. From 1947-77 General Electric dumped PCB's into the river as a matter of course. Raw sewage was streaming in for good measure. It was so polluted that it was nearly declared a dead river. People had given up on it.

But Pete decided it he loved it, and that it was a part of his mission. So he *hand built* a sloop he and Toshi named "Clearwater" and he began sail up and down the river. Soon he brought friends and politicians and anyone who would come with him to sail the Hudson, and learn to love it like he did.

He and Toshi then started the Clearwater festival where the best singers of the day came to sing to thousands, and get those who thought they were just coming to a great concert highjacked in the vision and work of a clean river.

Each year he mobilized more and more people to help clean up the river. He got laws changed about people using the river as a dumping ground. He got the Hudson declared as a superfund site. Even into his later years Pete engaged the local

schools, and each year brought kids on to the Clearwater, teaching them how to dip their empty vials into the river and monitor the river's health that very day. Adam told me that one of the teenage boys in the church was serving ten years ago got a scholarship to spend a whole week on the Clearwater.

When I watched that incredibly humble powerful man the night of the benefit I couldn't believe how within minutes the thousand people there that evening, including me, were under his spell.

What he made very clear right away was that he couldn't sing alone . . . that all of our voices were needed. He didn't just need all of us to sing because of his now wobbly voice, but because Pete Seeger *believed in all our voices*.

Here is the remarkable thing about a genuinely humble person like Pete Seeger: he wasn't there to be culled or lulled into something so superficial as being a hero.

By inviting us to join him in singing in that darkened auditorium, he was tapping and nominating everyone of us sitting there to join in something bigger than ourselves.

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We hear the same invitation from the gospel of Luke today, first from John the Baptist and then from Jesus.

It is an understatement to say that John does not present himself as a hero. When people ask whether he is the Messiah, he points *away* from himself to another.

Maybe it sounds as though when Jesus arrives we at last come to the hero of the hour. After all, he hears the voice from heaven, "**You are my Son, my beloved; with you I am well pleased.**" What better way to know the hero has arrived?

But even though people are looking for a hero, that is not who God is presenting. The first thing Jesus does is declare that his mission is to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. Immediately he calls Peter and James and John *and you and me* to join him in his joyous ministry.

A true Messiah, Jesus does not proclaim himself. He teaches us to look around our own world and to find our own passion for playing our part in God's ongoing story of human redemption. It is slow work, patient work, this work of redemption.

I think of how painstaking it must have been for Pete Seeger to nail and sand and stain his boat Clearwater. Surely he must have wondered he could ever make a difference. I have no doubt that the human Jesus had the same doubts many times in his ministry.

We hear often in the gospels how the people wanted to make Jesus into a hero, but he insisted on being a Messiah who harnesses each of our own skills and voices and talents. It is slow and patient work.

This new year of 2016 I'm noticing, as I'm guessing you are, that this church, *our own* Clearwater, is now ready to launch. It's all fixed up and ready to sail. We have downstairs newly reinvigorated and rented out, our new ceiling, our fresh paint, our sound system, our new lights, as of yesterday and yet another generous donor, even our own internet connection.

I wonder if this might be the year we are challenged to turn outside of ourselves; to figure out where we want to sail and ship and why?

What part of this Spokane Valley do we passionately love?

What are *we* called to do together to render this part of our own world more beautiful and peaceful and just?

Let me end by telling you a significant little detail I learned about Pete Seeger that night of the benefit. Etched onto his old banjo are these words: **"This machine surrounds hate and loves it to surrender."**

This is quite a challenge we face together in the year to come. May the same be said of our Church in the days and months to come.