

Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time - June 28, 2020

I consider myself to be an amateur historian; I enjoy the study of history, particularly World War II history. That is probably so since my father was an Army combat engineer in the Pacific theater of war but he died before I could ever ask about his wartime experiences. As a result, I have a voracious appetite for the history of the conflict that has had a lasting impact on the political, social and economic environment in the world today.

That said, I had the opportunity to recently share with my good friend, Ricardo, from Mesa, Arizona, the experience of watching the true-to-life movie, *Hacksaw Ridge*. This movie, released in 2016, graphically displays all of the horrors of war; so much so, that if you are squeamish, then this movie may not be for you. However, my wife, Mary, who is no fan of such movies, has watched it on multiple occasions since the inspirational themes of faith and sacrificial love resonate throughout the movie.

Hacksaw Ridge is a movie on the life of Desmond Doss, who experienced a rough childhood in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia. Desmond was raised during the Depression by an alcoholic, WWI veteran, who suffered from PTSD, the consequences of which negatively impacted his relationships at home. Prone, at times, to repeat his father's impulsive and violent behavior, Desmond almost killed his brother while roughhousing as kids; then, he almost shot his father during one of dad's violent outbursts. Realizing what could have happened, Desmond privately committed to God to a non-violent way of life.

However, World War II broke-out and Desmond felt called to enlist in the army as a combat medic, with the intent to save lives rather than take them. However, his military superiors and compatriots in boot-camp branded this "conscientious objector" as a coward; he was beaten by his fellow recruits and brought-up on charges of insubordination by his superiors with the intent to get Desmond out of the army. But Desmond wouldn't compromise his convictions or back-down from his non-violent calling and his faith in God. Eventually, the charges were dropped and Desmond was allowed to become a combat medic who did not carry any type of weapon into battle.

In the midst of the "hell fire of combat" on the island of Okinawa in the bloodiest battle in the Pacific during World War II, after his unit had retreated with heavy casualties, Desmond stayed behind on Hacksaw Ridge to care for the wounded. Amidst the deafening roar of combat, Desmond prayed to God and asked "What do you want of me?...I don't understand; I can't hear you!" Upon hearing the screams of the many wounded left on the field of battle, Desmond replies "All right!" and all night, for the next twelve hours, he single-handedly saved lives—scouring the dark and dangerous battlefield, treating, and evacuating 75 wounded US soldiers along with a number of wounded Japanese down a 350-foot cliff. All the while, he kept praying "Please Lord, help me get one more."

Desmond Doss was a disciple of Jesus Christ who received a call, **a mission**, to save lives in the midst of a world war. He knew that while he couldn't win the war by himself, he could at least try to save one life at a time on

the battlefield. God answered his prayer seventy-five times during that one night on Hacksaw Ridge. For his actions, Desmond Doss was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Last Sunday and today, in Matthew's gospel, we hear what is known as Jesus' Mission Discourse, in which Jesus describes the ramifications of what it means to be on mission as his disciple. We're told:

- We should not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul, because God the Father greatly cares for us even to the point that all of the hairs on our head are counted.
- To be worthy of being called a disciple we must take up our cross and follow Jesus; willing to suffer indifference, hostility and rejection, even rejection by our own families.
- Being a disciple requires total commitment to Jesus and a willingness to proclaim, through word and example, the Gospel message of love, redemption, salvation and hope to the ends of the earth.

Today's gospel passage concludes with the promise that whoever accepts the call to be a disciple will receive eternal reward, the reward of the righteous.

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis described the world in which we live as "enemy-occupied territory." We work, play, eat, sleep and live in the middle of a harsh spiritual battlefield. The task of fulfilling "the Great Commission," that of **making disciples of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth**, seems overwhelming. The world and our own sinful natures actively battle against us, and we know that we cannot win this war by ourselves.

But what if we were to pray the prayer of Desmond Doss, "Please Lord, help me get one more," as we, **each day**, seek to play a small part in Jesus' grand rescue mission on this earth?—A mission to which we are all called through our baptism into [Christ's] death as St. Paul told us in the second reading to the Romans.—Now, imagine a Church in which every person prayed this prayer, "Please Lord, help me get one more..." and, then, the prayer was answered! The Church would double in size within a year, and year after year...It wouldn't take long for the Kingdom of God to be fully realized here on earth. Then, imagine the joy of receiving your reward in heaven!

So I ask "Who is your one more?"