

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
Sunday, September 19, 2021
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost in Ordinary Time**

“First in Caring”

**Second of five sermons of a series entitled:
“Re-launching to Belong, Believe, and Become”**



Christian Scripture: Mark 9:30-37



To say Alfred Vanderbilt was born into privilege is something of an understatement. His great-grandfather, Cornelius Vanderbilt, left school at the age of eleven and then went on to make a fortune in shipping and railroads. Cornelius left the equivalent of \$150 billion in today’s money to his son, who then doubled

the family fortune. So, when Alfred inherited the family fortune, he had big shoes to fill. Vanderbilt set off from New York aboard the *Lusitania* in May 1915. Even though the waters of the Atlantic were teeming with German U-boats, most passengers on the huge vessel assumed that, since they were on a non-military ship, they would be safe. How wrong they were.



On the morning of 7 May, the *Lusitania* was attacked off the coast of County Cork, Ireland. It soon became clear that it was going down. Vanderbilt was, as a First-Class passenger, given a lifejacket. He gave it away. Then, as the ship started to sink, he concerned himself with making sure as many children as possible got into the lifeboats. Given his status – and given what had happened in 1912 on the *Titanic* – he could have easily got a spot on a lifeboat himself and saved his own skin. However, he was still trying to save others when the boat went under the waves. Vanderbilt's body was never found. A reporter in the *New York Times* noted that he displayed "gallantry which no words of mine can describe".¹

¹ D.G. Hewett, "Ten of the Most Heroic Acts of Self-Sacrifice in History", *History Collection*, June 9, 2018. Found at: <https://historycollection.com/10-of-the-most-heroic-acts-of-self-sacrifice-in-history/>, accessed September 18, 2021.

The story of Alfred Vanderbilt, and indeed at least ten of the disciple-apostles about whom we learned in our last series, inspire me.



Today, we welcome Norma Hardy, Brattleboro’s new Police Chief. She inspires me too. When Norma Hardy was a Captain in the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey Police Department during the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, she played an important role evacuating people who were underground and dangerously close to the bomb explosion site.



Duty called again on the morning of September 11, 2001. Norma’s mother called her at home and told her a plane had hit the World Trade Center. Norma looked out her window and saw the same sight many people in New York and New Jersey saw – smoke pouring out of upper levels of the Twin Towers. Norma realized that the region was under attack and she rushed to work. As she was

going through the Battery Tunnel from Brooklyn to Manhattan, it filled with smoke. Scared, she kept going and emerged from the tunnel into the horrific setting of the World Trade Center site. Norma parked her car and starting walking towards the street where the Port Authority Police Department was mobilizing. She was in shock.



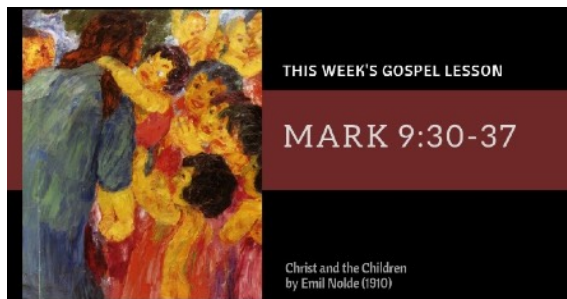
Norma stayed with the hundreds of other rescue workers who poured into lower Manhattan and worked at the site all day looking for victims and hoping to hear news about her missing co-workers. She worked on the bucket brigades, long lines of people who searched the enormous field of steel and pulverized material inch by inch.²



² 9/11 Tribute Museum, Unit 4, Biography, “Norma Hardy”, found at: <http://teaching911stories.911tributemuseum.org/lesson-plans/biography-norma-hardy/>, accessed September 18, 2021.

In our scripture reading this morning, we encounter what is an embarrassing episode when some of the disciples argued about who will be the greatest. Instead of scolding the disciples, Jesus used it as a teaching moment saying, “Anyone who wants to be first, must be the last and the servant of all”.

Today we honor men and women in our country who put others’ needs before their own by serving the public during the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, we appreciate to those in our society who could not work from home and sacrificially exposed themselves to the virus by interacting with and serving the public. They kept things going while others did their part and stayed home. From Jesus, we learn that the ultimate demonstration of leadership is sacrifice and the best leaders are servants.



We may think it strange that the gospel writer abruptly speaks about children and how they ought to be welcomed immediately after contradicting the disciple’s inclination to self-aggrandize. But the transition is not so startling when we realize that in the Ancient Near East, and in fact up until the twentieth century, children were often viewed as labor units and thus the bottom of the social

'pecking-order'. Until the modern era, children really had no rights and were terrifically vulnerable. In fact, in the Hebrew scriptures women, children (especially orphans), and immigrants were considered the most vulnerable in society and therefore deserving of special protection.



Attuned to the scriptures, Jesus' ministry also demonstrated special attention on women, foreigners, and, in our scripture this morning, children. Any society and any faith tradition ought to be judged on how it cares for those who are most vulnerable.

I am thankful for sacrificial leaders like Alfred Vanderbilt, Norma Hardy, and essential workers during COVID-19, like Nan Mann and her teachers, who cared for the wellbeing and safety of society's most vulnerable. They are all 'First in Caring'.

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the People of God responded, "Amen!"