

Sermon Text: Matthew 14:13-21

I enjoy reading “Sports Illustrated” each week, and especially, the first thing I read each week is Rick Riley’s column in the back. I think he’s had some very good ones. I don’t necessarily agree with everything he says, but I like a lot of it. In fact, right after the Super Bowl, he had a great article in there, and it was entitled “Making the Right Calls.” You might think that was calling the right play or calling the right defense in football, but it wasn’t. It was about a young man by the name of Deion Branch, who was the most valuable player in this past Super Bowl. He was a wide receiver for the New England Patriots. He had 11 catches for like 130 something yards in the Super Bowl game, but what the article was about, it said that Deion Branch, three hours, now they go on the field about an hour and 20 minutes before the game, but three hours before that Super Bowl game, world wide television, Deion Branch was sitting in the dressing room making phone calls. He was making phone calls, and he was basically calling people who had meant something to him throughout his life, and he was basically calling to say thank you. Thank you for caring. Thank you for sacrificing. Thank you for believing in me. He wanted them to know, that on this big day in his life, he was thinking about them. I thought that was very meaningful, and it made me think. Here’s a song, Becky, that we’re going to sing in a few minutes, “You Didn’t Know That You’re My Hero,” and so many of y’all out here are heroes to us. So many of y’all are heroes to me, for the leadership, for the example, for the influence that you have, and I just say thank you. Thank you for what you mean to this church. Thank you for what you mean to the ministry of this church. Thank you for what you mean to the people within this church. Deion Branch thought it was important to do, and I think it’s important to do.

That’s not the sermon today. I don’t want to say sermon. I’m not a minister so it’s not a sermon. That’s not the message. I’m going back to Rick Riley for one more article that I think does have a lot to do with what we want to say this morning. Last week in Rick Riley’s article, he talked about three athletes, three athletes, who in the last 25 years have taken their sports to where they haven’t been before. Three athletes who have taken their sports to different levels in the last 25 years. The first one he talked about was Wayne Gretsky, who is, of course, a hockey player, and he said that Wayne Gretsky took hockey to the west and the south in the United States. He took it where it had never been before. The second athlete he talked about was Tiger Woods, and he said that Tiger Woods has taken golf to the people of color. The third athlete he talked about, and you can probably guess who that would be, with what’s gone in the last couple of weeks, the third one he talked about was Lance Armstrong. He said that Lance Armstrong has taken cycling into the cancer wards, delivering hope. All three of the athletes have taken their sports in the last 25 years to a new level, to a new place, you might say.

Adam and Eve, Adam and Eve had a perfect union with God. In the beginning, there was a perfect union between Adam and Eve and God, and then they sinned. Then sin came into the world. Then humanity went through a spiral. We had judges. We had kings. We had prophets, but still no perfect union. Then came Jesus. Then came Jesus. Through the death of Jesus, he brought back the perfect union between God and us. Through his hanging on the cross, he brought back that perfect union, and through his

resurrection, he took Christianity to a new level. He took Christianity where it had never been before through his resurrection.

A story is told about two brothers that lived on a farm with their father. Yes, the story is going to sound somewhat familiar. The two brothers lived on a farm with their father. One was young, and one was old. The younger one decided he was going to leave. He said, "Dad, give me my money. I'm leaving." The father said, "Fine. Go." The younger brother went, and he stayed gone. He went from town to town. He stayed gone about six months. The father went to the older son, and said, "Look, I want my son back. Go find him. Bring him back. I'm getting old. I want to see him. I want him here." So the older brother said, "Sure, Dad, whatever you want, I will do." So the older brother went off, and he went looking for his younger brother. It so happened that they had this big farm, and all around the farm, there was town after town after town. The brother went from one town to the next to the next to the next town looking for his brother. He wasn't having much success. He was getting frustrated. Finally, he came to one town that looked like a ghost town. There wasn't anybody there. There was nothing going on. He said, "My goodness!" Finally, he saw one old guy, and he said, "Goodness gracious, is this a ghost town? Where is everybody?" He said, "Nah, everybody's down at the other end of town at the hanging. Got a hanging today. Everybody's down there." The brother said, "Well, sure enough, I guarantee you, if my brother's in town, he's down there at the hanging, too." He went down, and he walked through the crowd. He was glancing up, looking through the crowd, but he couldn't find his brother. He happened to glance up at the platform, and sure enough, there was his brother, about to be hung. They had a custom in that day. It was a custom very few people took them up on, but it was a custom that, right before the hanging, a man gets up and says, "Is there anybody willing to die in this person's place? Is there anybody willing to die in this person's place?" Like I said, that was the custom, but they didn't have a lot of hands going up! That's my closest to a joke, now; y'all are supposed to laugh a little bit at that. They didn't have many hands going up! It's bad when you've got to tell people that's a joke, isn't it? I haven't got many squeezed in here today. I've been told to make this short and sweet. I don't have many jokes in here. But seriously, this older brother's hand went up, and he started walking forward, and he said, "I'll die in his place." My goodness, you could hear the hush over the crowd. The man says, "Why? Why would you be willing to die in his place?" The older brother said, "My father sent me to bring his son home. I'll die so his son can go back home."

Jesus died on the cross for us. Jesus said, "I'll die in his place." Jesus overcame death through the resurrection. Jesus put it at another level. He moved Christianity to another level. He gives us hope. John 3:16 summed it up, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son." I love to say, "For God so loved Shell Dula that he gave his only begotten son." Put your own name in there. It makes it a lot more meaningful. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." Ever how you picture it, there are many stories that talk about the sacrifice of Jesus, that talk about the love of Christ hanging on that cross.

Shane Williamson, a young man who coached for us a number of years at Union, spoke in our pulpit here several months ago when we had our revival in the spring, Shane was talking to 350 athletes at Coastal Carolina two weeks ago. He put it this way, a way they could understand. There's a song out now, and Shane took that song, and basically, he was telling these 350 young men that, hey, Jesus took a bullet for you. I think about Clint Eastwood, and I think about "In The Line of Fire," and Clint Eastwood as the older Secret Service agent, and his willingness to take a bullet for the president. There's a song now that a lot of the young people listen to, and it talks about taking a bullet, and Shane used it that way. Ever how you want to say it, but we know what Christ did for us. Jesus Christ has taken us as Christians where we've never been before. Just like Tiger Woods has taken golf, just like Wayne Gretsky took hockey, just like Lance Armstrong took cycling, Jesus has taken us, even to a much, much greater degree, but Jesus has taken us to where we've never been before.

August 2005. Tomorrow is August 1. August 2005, we the people of Main Street United Methodist Church have a chance to that next level. We have a chance to move Main Street where it's never been before. Again, so much positive takes place here, and so much positive has taken place, but there's so much more that we can do. We've got a chance to go to that next level. We've got a chance to go to that next level. We've got a chance to go where we haven't been before in discipleship, in outreach, in programming, in service, in youth, in children, in adult ministry, in music ministry, in financial giving and support. We've got a chance to go where we haven't been before – to that next level.

There's a story about a man who was wandering around in Biblical times. He was wandering. He was lost. He wasn't sure where he was going or how he was going to get there, but he kept moving, and finally, he came upon a Roman soldier. The Roman soldier had on his outfit, and was all dressed. The Roman soldier shouted out, "Who are you? Who are you? What are you doing here? Who are you? What are you doing here?" The man said, "I don't know the answer, but I hope you'll ask me that same question every day so I can find out the answer." People of Main Street – who are we? What are doing here? Who are we? What are doing here? We're the people of God! We're the people of God led by his son Jesus Christ. That's who we are. God's people following God's son. Why are we here? What are we doing here? We're here to make the world a better place because we pass through it. That's why we're here. We're here to help our church be all that it can be in serving our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, to reach the next level, to go where we haven't gone before. We're the people of God following Christ. Can we reach that level where we minister to those in our community? Let me back up, first of all. Can we reach that level where we minister to our members, where we minister to our members in both the good and the bad, the plenty and the want, the popular and the unpopular, the sick and the healthy? Can we reach that level where we minister to those within our community through outreach such as the Prison Ministry, through programs where we provide space for counseling or Alcoholics Anonymous or whatever? Where we're willing to reach out and help whomever needs help, and we're willing to reach out in the name of Jesus. Can we reach the level where we say, "God, everything we have is a gift from you. Everything is a gift from you. Let me share with you what you've given me in a way I haven't before." Certainly, if our church is going to

do and reach the next level and be something it hasn't been, it's going to take unselfish giving ministry. Can we reach a level where we say, "God, we're your people?" Not just on Sunday. We're your people seven days a week, 24 hours a day. See, what makes so many of y'all special is that you do that. You do all these things. You reach out to our members. You reach out to the community. You reach out and give. You're God's person every day. That's what we're all working to do. That's what we all want to do. Can we do that? Yes! Yes! We can. Yes, we can. How do we do it? It's very simple. We do it together. We do it together. We grow together. We minister together. We reach out together. We love together. We serve together. We do it together. Secondly, we let Christ be our leader. We let Christ be our leader. We follow the perfect example, the perfect example, the one who has faced every temptation we face, every temptation we've faced, he's faced, the one who will never fail us, the one who laid it on the line when he hung on that cross 2,000 years ago. We do it together, and we follow him, then and only then, will we reach levels and have ministries that before we just thought about or before we just dreamed about. We follow him, and we do it together, and then the impossible dream becomes a reality. Main Street Methodist Church, with all the great that has been done, with all the great that is being done, we take the next step. We go to the next level. We become something that we dreamed about, and we make it a reality.