

# CINDERELLA MAN: DOWN BUT NOT OUT

Prayer.

Today's lecture comes from the fall of 2011,  
a series we did titled Heroes.

In that series,  
we looked at several heroes from well-known movies.

Some were fictitious –  
Terry Malloy in *On the Waterfront*  
Glenn Holland in *Mr. Holland's Opus* and  
Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Others were real life heroes.  
Oscar Schindler in *Schindler's List*  
Hal Moore in *We Were Soldiers*  
Mahatma Gandhi in *Gandhi* and  
the man we're looking at today –  
Jim Braddock in *Cinderella Man*.

All of those movies had important lessons to teach us.

But I chose this one  
because it reminds us in a wonderful way  
that life is a struggle for everyone.

At some point every man will end up face down on the canvas,  
feeling washed up, and  
wondering about what might have been.

But it also tells us  
that if we don't give up  
and if we don't stay down,  
we'll get another shot.

James J. Braddock,  
 was the heavy weight champion of the world from 1935-1937.

On the simplest level his is the story of a boxer  
 who because of injuries and misfortune,  
 failed to fulfill his dream of becoming the heavyweight champion,  
 and then after being out of boxing for a year,  
 trying to get work on the docks  
 in the middle of the depression,  
 was given a fluke chance to fight a contender for the crown.

And when he won that one,  
 he was given another,  
 until he fought and defeated Max Baer,  
 a victory that Joe Louis said  
 until Sonny Liston refused to come out for the seventh round  
 against then Cassius Clay in 1963  
 was the greatest upset in the history of boxing.

By all accounts,  
 James J. Braddock in real life  
 was in fact the decent, compassionate, family man and friend  
 we see in Cinderella Man.

And usually that's a problem in the movies.  
 Characters who are perverse and twisted  
 are much easier to make interesting and compelling.

After describing Cinderella Man as "a full-length portrait of a good man,"  
 Roger Ebert put it this way:

**Roger Ebert:** Most serious movies live in a world of cynicism and irony,  
 and most good-hearted movie characters live in bad movies.

But Cinderella Man is an exception.  
 It is a compelling film  
 about a genuinely good man.

Hats off to Ron Howard and Russell Crowe  
and to James J. Braddock  
for making simple goodness and decency  
so attractive and so manly,  
even heroic.

Cinderella Man is set during the great depression  
when jobs were tough to come by, and  
folks who had worked hard and played by the rules  
found themselves out of luck and unemployed,  
not certain who to blame or  
what to do.

Clip 04.30-4.40/7.27-8.34.

You can be doing well and living in a nice home in the suburbs,  
feeling like a winner;  
and if not in the time it takes to change from one scene to another,  
then in the course of a few quick years,  
your whole world can be upended and  
you can find yourself struggling to keep intact  
the things you once took for granted.

That happened to some of us during the pandemic.

James Braddock isn't James Bond or Bruce Wayne.  
He's not Clint Eastwood in The Man with No Name Trilogy.  
He's the anointed One Neo  
who hasn't yet come to grips with his special nature or his super powers.

James Braddock is -- everyman.  
He's a guy who needs a job.  
He's a guy who has a family that's depending on him,  
and who feels the weight of that responsibility every day.

He's a guy standing outside a fence  
with a hundred other guys,  
hoping to get picked  
and then hoping that the foreman won't notice his bum hand.

Braddock is just a guy, like ten million others,  
who's fallen on hard times  
who can't do anything to change the economy  
or end the depression, and  
who's hoping he can find a way to keep his family together  
and make some kind of life for them.

Every one of us knows that feeling.  
That's what makes James Braddock so relatable.

But what makes Braddock heroic  
is how he takes the punches,  
and keeps answering the bell,  
coming out round after round,  
maybe knocked down,  
but never staying down.

Why was Jim Braddock a hero?

Because he won the world heavyweight championship?  
Hardly.  
There are many men who have worn a championship belt  
that none of us would think of as a hero.

Mike Tyson comes to mind.  
Sonny Liston would be another.  
Jake La Motta (self-confessed rapist and abuser).  
George Foreman before he met Jesus  
and started selling grilling products.

Reaching the top of your profession doesn't make you a hero,  
not matter what your profession.

It just means you're good at what you do,  
not that you're – good.  
Then, why is Braddock a hero?

Several reasons, and the first one may sound strange.

### **1. His Humility.**

Let me ask you a question.  
If you remember the movie,  
when did Braddock stand the tallest?

Was it when with no time to train  
he stunned the world and defeated Corn Griffin,  
the number two contender for the crown?  
Or when, as a 10 to 1 underdog,  
he defeated Max Baer  
and became the heavyweight champion of the world?

That's when he heard the greatest applause  
and received the highest adulations.

But that wasn't his best moment;  
that's not when he was most heroic.  
Not in my mind,  
and I'd bet not in yours.

There are many great scenes  
where Braddock acts with strength and nobility,  
but here's when I believe he was at his best.

### **Clip: Begging money.**

For a man like Jim Braddock,  
what took more courage –  
stepping into the ring against a bigger man,  
or standing in front of those suits,  
looking small?

Walking into Madison Square Garden  
and facing Max Baer  
who had killed a man in the ring?

Or standing in that office,  
hat in hand,  
begging for help?

Braddock walks into the presence of men  
who knew him when he was their equal,  
confesses that he has gone on public assistance,  
asks for \$18 and 38 cents, and  
waits to see if anyone will respond.

It's a hard scene to watch.  
If you're a man  
you know what something like that would cost you,  
what it would do to your ego.  
You can imagine what you would feel  
and how hard it would be to humble yourself  
the way Braddock did.

But it's not a scene about being weak;  
is it?  
Just the opposite.  
It's a powerful depiction of incredible strength.

**Stephen Hunter:** ... he was as humble as he was heroic and as heroic  
as he was strong and as strong as he was noble.

Hunter gets it right.  
In that moment Braddock is noble and strong and heroic  
not in spite of being humble,  
but because he is humble.

Humility,  
true humility is not the virtue of wimps and weaklings.

Humility is not possessed by men who with no inner strength.

Men who cannot stand up for themselves  
or those they care for  
or the causes they believe in;  
men who are weak  
can never be humble,  
they can only be weak.

Humility is the characteristic of men who know who they are  
and who are certain of their self-worth  
and who consequently feel that they have nothing to prove  
and nothing to lose.

That kind of man can do what the moment calls for,  
even when others view it as humiliating,  
because he knows that a man's dignity is not determined by what he does  
nearly as much as by how and why he does it.

Our example, of course, is Jesus.

**Philippians 2.3-8:** Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Jesus knew who he was,  
being in very nature God.

Secure in that knowledge and strong in character,  
he could humble himself,  
serve others, and  
die the most shameful death the Roman empire had devised –  
a death so despised and so demeaning  
that no Roman citizen was ever executed that way,  
regardless of his offense.

Jesus had nothing to prove nothing to gain and nothing to lose.  
So, he could humble himself,  
and serve others  
regardless of how it made him appear.

What gets men into trouble more than anything else?  
Our pride.

I like the pride that makes men compete  
and do their best.

But there's another kind of pride  
that will wreck our lives and make us miserable.

It's not just the pride that thinks it's always right  
and won't admit that it's wrong.

It's the pride that won't let us admit our needs  
because we think that having needs makes us weak.  
And so we stay needy and defensive.

It's the pride that won't let us open up to others  
because we're fearful that we'll be rejected  
if people know who we really are.  
And so we stay afraid and alone.



It's the pride that won't ask for help or accept it when it's given,  
because men are supposed to be self-sufficient and strong.  
And so we stay out of touch with our humanity  
and we don't receive the gifts that God wants to give us through others.

I love the fact that Braddock is so open with his wife.  
Jim tells Mae how much he needs her.  
And he not only loves her,  
he lets her love him.

And honestly,  
one of the most beautiful aspects of the movie,  
is how deeply they care for each other,  
and how much they enjoy each other.

That doesn't happen when men are driven by their pride.

Why is James Braddock a hero?  
Not because he defeated Max Baer,  
but because he defeated his pride  
and lived with the kind of humility that has nothing to prove and nothing  
to lose.

Another Reason:

## **2. His Honor.**

Like many others during the depression,  
Braddock received money from the government.  
Like few others,  
he paid the money back.

In the movie when he is asked why he did so,  
he doesn't offer some deep philosophical rationale or  
political polemic.

For him it's this simple.

Quote:

I've had some good fortune,  
 I'm back in the black, and  
 I just thought I should return it.

Should.

It's a word we're not comfortable with much anymore.  
 And when we do hear it,  
 it's usually someone telling others what they should do.

But rarely do we hear someone say I thought I should.  
 Rarely do we see men,  
 men of the world,  
 living a life of shoulds  
 and moral obligations,  
 and being controlled by what is right  
 instead of what is pleasurable or profitable.

But there it is.  
 And I have to tell you that on a man like Jim Braddock  
 played by a guy like Russell Crowe,  
 it's incredibly attractive.

And I bet it would look pretty good on you, too.

Men who are weak and too afraid of the consequences to get people upset  
 with them in trouble – we see that.  
 Men who are strong and brutish and don't care about others –  
 we see that.

But men who are truly strong – and genuinely good,  
 how often do you see that?

But when you do,  
it will impress you  
and you will remember it.

You will feel you have been in the presence of someone  
who is honorable.  
And dignified,  
even noble.

And you will be inspired to be more than you are.

Jump to another scene.  
Braddock comes home to find that his son Jay  
has stolen a salami from the butcher.

**Clip:**

Immediately there's the lesson  
of having to go to the butcher,  
and confess and apologize.  
A father needs to teach his son  
those lessons.

And there's the beauty of a father who understands  
that his son is scared about being sent away.

And so he is gentle and comforts the boy and  
promises that he won't let that happen to their family.

But the moral of the story, Dad drives home.

We don't steal.  
Things may be bad,  
but we won't be bad.

Life may take everything else from us,  
but we will have each other  
and we will keep our honor.

**Roger Ebert:** ... a full-length portrait of a good man. Here is a movie where a good man prevails in a world where every day is an invitation to despair, where resentment would seem fully justified, where doing the right thing seems almost gratuitous because nobody is looking and nobody cares.

Except for one thing.

For James Braddock doing the right thing is not unimportant because no one cares,

it is essential because he will care.

And to an honorable man that is all that matters,

not what others think of you,

but what you know to be true of yourself.

**Abraham Lincoln:** I desire to conduct the affairs of this administration that ... when I lay down the reins of power, if I have lost every other friend on earth, I shall have at least one friend, and that friend shall be down inside me.

Being able to look in the mirror

and like, even be proud of, the man you're looking at –

that doesn't happen because you've reached the top of your profession,

or made a lot of money,

or you've got people fooled

and they think you're one thing

when you know you're something else.

It happens when

you keep your word.

It happens when you do what you **should** do,

and you fulfill your commitments,

and you refuse to act as if the things that matter most

don't matter at all.

Liking the man you see in the mirror

comes when the man in the mirror is an honorable man.

Jim Braddock's life is an invitation to be honorable men.  
It tells us that even if no one else is looking and no one else cares,  
    you will know.  
And it tells us that the price we must pay for honor is never too much.

Another reason Braddock's a hero:

### 3. His Heart.

#### Clip: From the Inside Out

Heroes have huge hearts.

They love someone so much,  
    they care about something so deeply,  
    they are committed to some cause so passionately,  
that they simply cannot quit.

Heroes can die trying.  
But they cannot **stop** trying.

In other words,  
    every hero lives out of his heart.  
Every hero ultimately  
    wins his battles from the inside out.

If you've seen the movie,  
    you'll remember the scene.  
Braddock takes Lasky's best shot,  
    and Lasky thinks it's over.  
He's won,  
    he's sure of it,  
    and so is everyone else.

Until, Braddock looks at him,  
    picks up his mouthpiece,  
    smiles,  
    and steps towards him.

This is a movie about a boxer.  
But it's also a movie about the depression  
and about how people survived the depression.  
What got them through it  
and what kept them going?

And the answer is heart.  
That's how we win most of the battles that matter.

Life can take your house,  
and it can take your stocks.  
It can take your job  
and it can take your plans.

But life cannot take your heart.  
It can beat you up  
and knock you down.

But it cannot determine whether or not  
you get back up.

You can always decide how you will live  
and what you will live for.

And if you continue to  
love someone more than you love yourself  
and care about a cause that matters more than life itself;  
if you don't give up  
and if you don't give in;  
you will find a way to get up off the canvas,  
and live the hero's life.

We get confused often.  
We watch a movie  
and we think it's man against man.  
That's the battle.

It's Braddock against Lasky.  
Or Braddock against John Henry Lewis.  
Or Braddock against Baer.

But that's not it,  
not really.  
The hero's battle is always man against self.

Before a man becomes a hero  
there is usually some great enemy that must be defeated.

But before the hero can win that battle,  
he must win a battle within himself.

There is  
some commitment that must be made,  
some fear that must be faced,  
some lie that must be rejected,  
some risk that must be taken,  
some sacrifice that must be made,  
some temptation that must be overcome,  
some truth that must be claimed.

In every great story the most important battle is always fought and won  
in the heart of the hero,  
and only then can there be victory on the battlefield or in the ring.

Here's what the real Jim Braddock said before he fought Max Baer.

**Jim Braddock:** I'm training for a fight. Not a boxing contest or a clownin' contest or a dance. Whether it goes one round or three rounds or ten rounds, it will be a fight and a fight all the way. When you've been through what I've had to face in the last two years, a Max Baer or a Bengal tiger looks like a house pet. He might come at me with a cannon and a blackjack and he would still be a picnic compared to what I've had to face.

Braddock had already won the hero's battle.  
He had already faced bigger giants than Max Baer,  
and he had defeated them from the inside out.

Look what the Apostle Paul wrote about his life,  
proclaiming Christ and being persecuted.

**2 Corinthians 4.7-9:** We are like clay jars in which this treasure is stored.  
The real power comes from God and not from us. We often suffer, but  
we are never crushed. Even when we don't know what to do, we never  
give up. In times of trouble, God is with us, and when we are knocked  
down, we get up again.

There is a treasure within us,  
a power, Paul says.  
And it's that power that enables us to overcome.  
That's why we don't give up,  
and that's why we don't stay down.  
Because Jesus Christ lives in our heart.

Life is going to be a battle,  
you can count on that.  
And your greatest battles will be  
the battles to stay true to who you are and to what you believe.  
And those battles will be fought in your heart.

And those are battles you can win,  
if the power of Christ lives within you.

Last reason Braddock is a hero.



#### 4. Home.

Every hero fights for something.  
Usually it's something grand like justice or truth or freedom.

But Braddock fights for what's most basic  
and what's most important.

Home.

#### Clip: Milk.

When we began,  
I said that on one level Cinderella Man is about a boxer  
who gets a second chance.  
On another level,  
it's about the depression  
and the dignity and the power of the American spirit.

But on the most basic level,  
it's about a man who's trying to keep his family together and warm and  
fed.

Cinderella Man is less about what it feels like to win the heavyweight  
championship  
and more about what it feels like to see your children hungry and cold  
and then to discover that your wife has farmed them out to the relatives.

And most of all, it's about what it feels like  
to get the heat turned back on  
and to go get your kids,  
and when they run into the dark, dingy cellar basement you live in,  
they scream with joy  
and they jump on the beds,  
and they shout: We're home  
because they're with you.

Guys, we want to go off and slay the dragon.  
We want to make a name for ourselves  
and be admired by others.

But in 2011 I started the series Heroes  
with James J Braddock because that's not what drove him.

He didn't fight for glory,  
or for his name to ring out  
or for fortune  
or even to prove his mettle to others or to himself.

He fought for milk.  
He fought for his family.

He fought so that at the end of the day  
he could come home  
and read his kids a bedtime story  
and sit outside with his wife.

That may not sound very heroic to you,  
I don't know.

But I started with Braddock  
because I need to remember and  
I think you need to remember  
that our greatest victories  
aren't won in the office  
or at your job;  
they are won in our homes  
with our wives and our children.

I tell young fathers,  
brother, 20 years from now,  
the one thing that will matter to you most is  
do your kids want you in their lives,  
do they know that you love them  
and do they love you.

Do they feel like you know them  
and when they're alone and hurting,  
and when they're successful and proud,  
and when they're worried and confused,  
do they pick up the phone and call – you.

Making lots of money  
and giving them lots of things won't create that relationship.

What does it is a father who slows down when he's home, and  
who listens, and  
who understands, and  
who makes them feel secure and treasured.

Men,  
Whatever dragon you have to slay,  
whatever battle you have to fight – out there,  
remember that what matters most is being a hero  
to your wife and your kids.

**Clip: You are the Bulldog of Bergen**