

Our Heroes

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July 12, 2009
Growing in Gratitude II

Hebrews 11:1-4, 8-16
Luke 22:24-27

You may or may not be a fan of Jesse Jackson, but you have to admit that he has come a long way from very humble origins. He once said that growing up as a fatherless child in difficult surroundings in a little home in South Carolina gave him one asset. He went to Sunday School. And there he heard his teacher tell about the great heroes of the Bible. He knew in his little heart that if God could use them in great ways, God could use Jesse, too. That was the greatest influence, he says, in the kind of man he grew up to be.

We all have our heroes. They tell us a lot about what we value and hold most dear. When I was a kid, my hero was Mickey Mantle, who could blast tape-measure home runs while hobbling around the bases on bad knees. Later, I loved the guitar playing of Eric Clapton and the political vision of Robert F. Kennedy. Then it was Martin Luther King and Mother Teresa who stirred my spirit. And then there's Jesus---but he's in a category all by himself.

I've been reading a lot about heroes this week, about what makes someone an heroic figure. Words keep surfacing like Courage, Character and Commitment. Then there is Service and, of course Sacrifice. But when it all gets broken down to basics, I think, a hero is someone who is willing to put the interests of someone else in front of his or her own. In an era when the pursuit of self-interest has been raised to an art form, heroes are people who actually look out for the other guy, not just for good old "number 1." This is kind of an extraordinary thing to say, but it's true.

That's why the heroes of 9/11 became so universally admired. Not great world leaders or public figures, the firefighters, police officers and emergency workers who rushed into those flaming buildings that awful morning were men and women like us, people we knew or could have known who lived down the block, who sat next to us in church or who stood on line behind us in the store. People, real people, with one critical difference: they did what most of us only think about doing. They raced into the abyss without concern for their own safety, sacrificing themselves to save others.

The actions of those brave souls has changed the way a lot of us look at heroes. Caped crusaders and comic book characters may make the movies, but the everyday heroes who give of themselves for the good of others are the ones who make truly inspire. They may not have mega-funerals and receive endless press coverage, but their names are written in heaven.

John Napolii was an Italian immigrant fisherman who lived in San Francisco several decades ago. Returning with his catch of fish one foggy morning, he piloted his boat beneath the Golden Gate Bridge when he came upon a horrifying scene. There were people in the water, everywhere. A hospital ship had collided with an oil tanker and people were flailing in the choppy waves, shouting, "Help me! Save me! I'm drowning!"

John Napolii carefully guided his fishing vessel to a cluster of drowning men. He quickly began to pull them aboard one by one, so much so that the small fishing boat soon was overcrowded. John Napolii then made one of the hardest decisions of his life. He dumped his entire cargo of 2,000 pounds of fish, worth thousands of dollars, into the waters of San Francisco Bay and pulled more than 70 people aboard his boat.

As far as this Italian fisherman was concerned there was something more important than profits, and that was people. I think we'd all agree that John Napolii is a hero.

Could you or I have done that? Could we have been as brave and selfless? I don't know. I guess no one does until their moment arrives.

But we don't necessarily need to race into a burning building or dump our livelihood overboard to be a hero. Each of us is presented countless opportunities to put the interests of others before we take care of our own, to serve the common good before we serve ourselves.

This is what spiritual heroes do. People who preach their faith in the way they care for those near to them, and those in distant places, too. Disciples who see that true greatness lies not in sitting at the table and being served like a big shot but in serving those who need a meal. Folks who take the pledge they make at a child's baptism as we did today that they will not leave the spiritual development of God's children to her parents alone or to others who have the calling to work with children, but that they will take it upon themselves to personally show the love of Jesus to each child in their church. And they will go out of their way to show that love not by expecting children to come up to their adult standards but by their willingness to get down to their level, to care for each precious life as if it were their own child, because, in the family of faith, they are. Each child is our child. It takes a church to make a Christian.

How many of us are still a part of a church family today because of the seriousness with which those around us took this vow when we were growing up? How many of us are Christians because someone—someones—loved us with the love of Jesus. It happened for me in my little home church, Epworth Methodist in Whitestone, Queens. I can still remember wondering: How come all of these people are being so nice to me? I'm just a little pipsqueak. I haven't done anything special to earn their favor. They don't even know me, really. I'm just Bill and Grace Horne's kid.

But that was enough. I was there. I was a little pipsqueak. And they took me in as one of their own. They taught me my Bible lessons. They fed me lots of good things to eat. But more than anything else, they loved me. Bill and Edith Reid from Pennsylvania, Egon and Dorcas Horsball from Denmark, Evelyn McCrae and Rena Mae Krevor from the deep south, Harriet and Gustav Nern all the way from Astoria---and many more of varying nationalities, backgrounds and races whose names are now more distant but whose imprint on my soul is deep and undying. They made me feel special and valued. They took an interest in my welfare. They did not miss an opportunity to affirm me. They are my spiritual heroes.

And I have many more. Teachers, pastors, coaches---all guides along the journey. All have been instruments of grace in my life. Grace that was unearned and unconditional. How blessed I have been. How grateful I am.

What about you? Who has shown you the love of Jesus in word, by example, or better, in the way they loved you? Who has prayed with you or for you during the dark days of your life? Who has guided you when you didn't know the way? Who has mentored you, nurtured you, put themselves second while placing you first?

In this summer of gratitude, let us give thanks for those upon whose shoulders we so firmly stand. Let us remember the ones who taught us, protected us and did not flinch in the commitment to love us even when we were less than loveable, who refused to give up on us although we might have given up on ourselves, who in many ways made us what we are today.

In my view, there are no self-made men or women. We are made through the gifts of those who care for us. None of us is self-created. The heroes of our lives shape and form us. It is what we mean by grace. The grace that baby Madeline has begun now to know for herself. The grace that has reached out to us before we were even aware that there was grace, the grace that brought us safe thus far will lead us safely home to the land where all the saints of God find their rest.

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