

Of Heroes and Heroines

Hebrews 11:8-40; Ecclesiasticus 44:1-15

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This year it falls on May 26. Its origins go back to the Civil War era when the graves of fallen soldiers in the south were decorated with flowers and flags on what they referred to as Decoration Day. In 1971 it became an official federal holiday designated for the final Monday of May. I am referring of course to Memorial Day. To be sure, it is not a day recognized on the liturgical calendars, but it still occupies a spot on our personal and business calendars it thus seemed appropriate to reflect with you on the subject of heroism itself, the nature and the need for it.

Does tomorrow hold any special significance for you and if so, why? Frankly, the purpose of this designated day of remembrance and honor seems to me at least to be fading and perhaps even forgotten by many if not most of us. Oh yes, the evening news tomorrow will probably include an obligatory mention of the President laying a wreath at the tomb of the unknown soldier, but for many people the day symbolizes nothing so much as a paid day off from work, or the beginning of holiday rates at various resorts, or the running of the Indianapolis 500, or a rare family outing. Commercial interests, for no discernable reason other than to exploit the holiday, promote Memorial Day sales for cars, clothing, mattresses, etc.

Who or what will you be honoring this Memorial Day? On a functional or conscious level whom do you regard as your real heroes and heroines who are worthy of our honor and emulation? It is not a trivial question given the fact that cultures, clans, and even nations are often defined by those they deem to be their heroes. The term *hero* is thrown around indiscriminately and loosely with no comprehension of what the term even means.

If this is so, then there is a disturbing trend today because of the seeming absence of the truly heroic among us — of people who live virtuous, admirable, exemplary and sacrificial lives, in service to others of people who can serve as worthy role models for the rising generations.

Truth be told, heroes and heroines have largely been replaced by a new breed of creature fashioned by the media. When I was in seminary I read a powerful book by the social historian Daniel Boorstin which has proven to be not just insightful, but prophetic. In 1963 in his book, The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America, Boorstin maintains that America has misled itself in its quest for heroism, that we have an exaggerated estimate of how much greatness can be found in individuals. And he adds that we have exchanged the older form of greatness for a new kind of eminence. A new creature has pushed aside heroes, saints, and martyrs in our culture. This creature is known as a “celebrity.” He writes: “The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-known-ness. Two centuries ago when a great person appeared, people looked for God’s purposes in him (or her); today we look for his press agent.

Boorstin adds later: “The household names, the famous men (and women) who populate our consciousness are with few exceptions not heroes at all, but an artificial new product --- a product of the graphic revolution in response to our exaggerated expectations. The more readily we make them and the more numerous they become, the less are they worthy of our admiration.”

Ask young people today who their heroes are, and you as likely as not to be told the name of some musician or entertainer you have never heard of, some actor or athlete or politician whose name may be recognizable but whose life is anything but admirable or exemplary.

Now one could argue that the media not only creates the seemly heroic but also delights in destroying them. With every person’s life an open book today, and with the media all too anxious to expose a character flaw or reveal an indiscretion to a public with an insatiable appetite for the prurient and the sordid, it is more difficult than ever to wear the hero’s crown for very long.

Every person at some moment has probably said or done something less than heroic, something that violates their own professed principles, and since “an inquiring mind wants to know” as one supermarket tabloid likes to say and since an aspiring journalist needs a juicy story, preferably a scandalous one, they are happy to share the dirt. What is more, those who do attempt to live on a higher plain or stand by their faith and values are often portrayed to the public as moralistic, self-righteous frauds. Is it any wonder heroes and heroines are in such short supply today? No sooner do we find them than their feet of clay are quickly exposed.

Maybe we should refocus or redefine what it means to be a hero. Popularity, name recognition, physical or intellectual abilities press coverage all have little if anything to do with genuine heroism. This morning I did not choose an Old Testament lesson to be read for worship because I want to read you a passage from one of the Apocryphal books. While the Apocryphal books are not regarded as canonical or authoritative for Protestants, our Reformation ancestors encouraged us to read and study these works for insight and edification never the less. Unfortunately, we have largely ignored them. Did you listen to what I read this morning written by Jesus son of Eleazar, son of Sirach; in the Apocryphal books it is known as Ecclesiasticus or Sirach?

Obviously for our Hebrew ancestors not all heroes and heroines were known or named, but they were heroes none-the-less. Singer/songwriter Paul Overstreet (a native of Newton, Mississippi by the way) has written a number of lovely and popular country songs and one of my favorites was from a number of years ago entitled “*Heroes*.”

*He drives into the city and works extra hard all day.
He finishes up early so he can get away.
Cause there’s a blue-eyed kid on second base, wants Dad to watch him play.
And Daddy knows he’s waiting so he hurries on his way.*

Chorus: *Cause you know heroes come in every shape and size
Making special sacrifices for others in their lives,*

*No one gives them metals, the world don't know their names. (I know it should be doesn't instead of don't but remember is a country song.)
But in someone's eyes, they're heroes just the same!*

*She rocks a crying baby in the hours before dawn,
She whispers worlds of hope to help her husband hold on,
She takes time for the children making sure they know she cares,
She's more than just a mama, she's the answer to their prayers*

Chorus: *Cause you know heroes come in every shape and size
Making special sacrifices for others in their lives,
No one gives them metals, the world don't know their names,
But in someone's eyes, they're heroes just the same!*

Hebrews 11 is sometimes called the “Hall of Fame for Faith’s Heroes.” We read only a portion of it this morning, but if we reflect on this biblical description of some of heroes and heroines in the kingdom of God, we may just discover some of the traits that would help us both to recognize genuine heroes and even inspire us to join their ranks.

To begin with look at the cherished verse that introduces the entire discussion of God’s heroic servants in *Hebrews 11*: “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” This suggests, does it not, that heroic faith involves risks and courage, the courage of conviction which does not always have the certainty of facts.

If a soldier knew for certain that if he crawled out of his foxhole to retrieve a wounded comrade, that he would be perfectly safe, then there would be nothing heroic about his effort. But if he knew he could well be wounded or killed, and yet the attempt was both necessary and noble, then he would have shown the courage and the risk implicit in heroism.

If Abraham had known in advance what the promised land would be like or what the blessing for his descendants would be he would have ventured forth from Haran without qualm or question. But it would have been nothing heroic about it. But Abraham showed his faith in that he ventured forth not knowing what to expect in a land yet unknown and unseen.

If I knew for a fact that tithing to the Lord’s work would be rewarded with greater wealth and responsibility, I would be a fool not to do so and certainly not hero. But if I give because I was convinced it is the right thing to do, that it was both my duty and delight, regardless of the consequences, then my generosity would be a heroic act of faith and obedience.

Heroes act without the assurance or the proof that what they do will necessarily be successful. But they act anyway in accordance with what they believe. Heroism is not possible apart from courage and risk.

Heroes and heroines in a second sense have their eyes on the future. They have a vision and a passion that looks beyond the present or the immediate. After telling of Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Sarah, the writer of *Hebrews* says, “*All these died in faith without*

having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.” These heroes are described as “strangers and foreigners,” as aliens and exiles because their sights were set on God’s future and not on their present or immediate circumstances. To be heroic one must take the longer view and not the nearer. We might even say that from a faith perspective a hero has an eternal view.

My friends, this life with all of its challenges and choices is but a testing ground, a time of preparation for the age to come. And if we go through our seventy years, plus or minus, thinking this life is all there is and all that matters, trying to squeeze out as much comfort and pleasure and honor that we can accumulate along the way, then we are far less likely to achieve the heroic or to accomplish what we might have. We will not likely get far beyond our own needs and wishes and the world about us will be little altered by the lives we lead. And we will have spent our days safe in the shallows of security and selfishness but there will be certainly nothing heroic about that.

Thirdly, heroes and heroines are not only courageous and visionary, but they are willing to make costly personal sacrifices in the quest for a greater good, a Godly goal. Heroism isn’t cheap, and it isn’t easy. It can be and often is very costly, but heroes are so committed to doing the right thing rather than the easy or popular thing that they are willing to pay the price to achieve the prize.

A PSB presentation on the civil rights movement a few years ago was entitled: “Eyes on the Prize,” and it chronicled the sacrifices, the struggles, and the price that had to be paid before racial equality and opportunity could be achieved. And there were in that struggle countless heroes and heroines, some known but most never named or known. But they were people who had the courage, the vision, and the willingness to suffer and sacrifice that justice might be served. It was a heroic struggle in every sense of the word. The cost was great but the prize was well worth it. And is it not true, whether we are speaking of our faith or politics, or our work, or our passions, or our goals, that if they do not cost us something then they may probably worth very little to us. Heroes do not stop and count the cost if they are committed to a purpose or a cause. Regardless of the cost.

By the way, go ahead and mark your calendars for Wednesday, October 23rd. I have invited a retired psychologist from Auburn, Alabama, now living in Montreat to come and share with us a documentary she is making on Presbyterian ministers in the deep South who took risky and courageous stands on civil rights and lived heroic and admirable lives as people of faith. Among the eleven subjects of this documentary are some pastors you and I know — like Eade Anderson, Vernon Hunter, and John Kuykendall.

As *Hebrews 11* draws to a close it speaks of many heroes and heroines who paid the price of their faith and obedience. We read: “*Others were tortured, refusing to accept release in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented — of whom the world was not worthy.*”

My friends don't allow this Memorial Day weekend to pass without recognizing and remembering in gratitude our heroes and heroines, military, historical, civic, religious and otherwise, who have left us the benefits and the blessings we now enjoy in this nation and within the kingdom of God. And let us resolve afresh to be more heroic in our own lives, to make a renewed commitment to courage, to a vision of God's purposes and to the sacrifices required by true heroism.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.