

ARE THERE ANY HEROES?

Deuteronomy 7:6-8
Ephesians 4:25-5:2

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The renowned preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, said that during his sophomore year of college, "wild horses could hardly have dragged" him into a church. He began his junior year with the purpose to "clear God out of the universe." He slaughtered every sacred cow. But that was before Fosdick met William Newton Clarke.

Professor Clarke knew more about modern thinking than most, yet he was the most devout Christian. Dr. Fosdick said his very presence seemed to say, "Essential Christianity is not irreconcilable with modern knowledge." It was the sweet spirit and open mind of this saint which opened the door of the ministry to Dr. Fosdick.

William Clarke was certainly one of the heroes of Harry Emerson Fosdick; a hero who was a saint in every sense of the word. He was not the sickly, introverted, impossibly pious type, but the gay and laughter-loving saint. St. Theresa, herself, prayed; "From silly devotions and gloomy saints, good Lord, deliver us." A saint is rarely the kind of person you see depicted in a stained glass window. St. Andrew was a fish dealer. St. George was an army officer. St. Paul was a tent maker. Yet, each was a hero in the Christian life, saints who were called by God and saints because we consider them saints, persons who are worthy to model.

I. PERSONAL SAINTS CHANGE

Dr. Fosdick needed someone to inspire him and he found a saint. But everyone we put on the pedestal of sainthood is not necessarily a saint. In fact, our heroes may change from healthy mentors to persons who lead us down a path of destructiveness.

When we were children, Dad and Mom put us to bed, listened to us say our prayers, kissed us and turned out the lights. In the darkness, we felt safe because we had our Lone Ranger doll or our teddy bear clutched ever so tightly. I still have the Roy Rogers bedspread that kept my brother and me safe through the lonely dark nights. Only a power failure would have kept us from hearing Roy and Dale sing, "Happy Trails To You."

But when kids become teenagers, their saints change overnight. Then it's the Motley Crue and the Pet Shop Boys. These are a strange breed of saints banging on guitars and pouring out lyrics that I can't understand. It was never this way in my teenage generation. We had a choice of real saints and heroes.

My hero during those years changed from Roy Rogers to a real hero--Elvis. With a gallon of Wild Root Cream Oil Hair Tonic, I tried to create his hairstyle; the ducktail. Then, like many other 16 year old boys, I stood in front of the mirror and practiced my Elvis imitations. After all, Elvis had the girls squealing and fainting at his feet. And even with my poor imitation, I hoped that maybe I could at least inspire a couple of girls to faint.

During those Elvis years of the later 50's and early 60's, there were saints all around. There were real heroes with which I could converse everyday. But I didn't notice that they were saints.

One that I now remember most vividly was my school bus driver. Mrs. Anna Lou, as we called her, was driving the bus when I struggled to reach the first step as I started the first grade. She also opened the door of that bus to see me safely off the last day of my twelfth grade.

During those years, I never really noticed why she gave us candy at Christmas. I even grew to expect her to buy us ice cream the last day of school each year. And now, despite the years that have lapsed since then, I never will forget the time she backed the bus a quarter of a mile down the dirt road to our driveway. She did this while I held Snowball, our pet dog who was blind. Snowball had become confused and wandered into the road. It was her empathy and love for us that caused her to push aside the bus schedule to help put Snowball safely in his pen.

It's too bad that I just now noticed this saint who touched my life. You see, about three weeks ago she fell asleep in the arms of God while sitting on her front porch. And I never mailed a letter or even a post card to this saint who lived the spirit of our Lord. I've got to live with that.

II. SAINTS ARE NECESSARY

These imperfect saints who have a positive influence on people's lives are important. I didn't recognize Mrs. Anna Lou as a model for my life, but she was. And our souls and spirits need them just like our bodies need water.

Where would we be in our understanding of God if a little band of people had not listened to the call of God? They did understand ever so vaguely that the Lord had chosen them "to be a people of his own possession." They became theologians of the ancient world. They proclaimed to the ancient world and the modern that all people should live "by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord." (Deuteronomy 8:3)

Paul said that we are to be "imitators of God." We are to "walk in love, as Christ loved us." (Ephesians 5:1-2) To Titus, Paul proclaimed that we "show (ourselves) in all respects a model of good deeds." (Titus 2:7) We are to be Christian models and it is assumed we also need saints to model and inspire us.

We even learn language through modeling. A baby begins to babble all kinds of vowels, consonants and combinations of the two. One day, in the presence of his father, he babbles the word "dada." Old dad is, of course, delighted at such recognition. He hugs the child and points to himself repeating the words, "daddy! daddy!" Once this happens a few times, baby is able to say "Daddy" loud and clear, modeling his parents' vocabulary. In time, this bundle of joy learns new words and how to put them into sentences. Then, while you are at a formal dinner party or at church, your two year old shares some of the sailor words he's learned.

Now that I look reflectively back to my ministerial work in northeast Georgia, it was frustrating because I didn't have a professional model which I respected. That sounds snobbish, but there was no one there.

We need someone to admire and to attempt to model. Who do you admire? Is there someone you have secretly wished you were a little like? Dr. Bob Moore,

professor and pastoral therapist at Chicago Theological Seminary, implied in his remarks during class a few weeks ago that people need a personal saint. If we don't have one, we have problems with our models during our early years as children.

III. CHOOSE SAINTS CAREFULLY

This means that we need to choose our saints carefully. In the Catholic Church, before a person is declared "a saint", that person has to meet certain standards of excellence. Saints are saints because of their holiness and accessibility to others as a model. Their lives parallel that of Christ. There is a little more of God incarnate in them than most.

A businessman doesn't choose to model the business practices of one who over a period of years had a series of failures. The books that sell are the success stories of people like Ford, Rockefeller and maybe Lee Iacoco. These are the people one chooses to model. We need to choose saints who inspire, not only us, but others.

Secondly, we need to choose our personal saints carefully because the person we choose to model may reflect something of who we are. Most every member of a city gang wants to be as tough and mean as their leader. But, like their leader, they are all members of a gang. Each may wear certain attire to prove it.

Third, our models can, because of their humanity, disappoint us. I could not help but wonder how the loyal followers of Jim Bakker felt when the news broke of his questionable behavior and financial mismanagement. Many had sent donations from their retirement checks for years. Just how did they feel?

I don't know much about politics, but it seems that a carnival shooting gallery has developed. As soon as a new candidate pops up, the news media shoots him down. Within weeks of a person throwing his hat into the political arena, you consider voting for him, then your political candidate has to back out of the race because of questionable irregularities. So much for confidence and deep regard for that candidate. And we do give careful thought before casting our ballot for a particular person. How much objective thought is given to choosing a model for living?

The ultimate model is, of course, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Jesus told Thomas, "I am the way, and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." (John 14:6) "I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you." (vs. 18) "Abide in me. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will and it shall be done for you." (15:7) He is our ultimate model.

CONCLUSION

There are those saints that truly abide in Christ. There are the Professor Clarke's, the Mrs. Anna Lou's, and maybe the person sitting next to you. There are people who love because "God is love," persons with a little more of God living in them.

One day you may walk into your teenager's room and there will be a poster on the wall of some person who obviously came from Mars. Parents, there is hope. This, too, will pass and he/she will choose other saints. Let's hope the next choice will be carefully chosen. There are so many people available to model. The choice could be me or you.

Pretend with me that we know that someone has chosen us as their saint. What are they learning from you/me? Would they find the love of God there? Would they know that God's love dwells within?

Shocking questions, aren't they? Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: "WHAT TO PRAY FOR"

Dear God of life and the source of love in all creation, we long to hear your still small voice and feel the warmth of your presence.

Lord, we pray that our conversation with you this morning will be different than the other times when we have conversed. Usually, what you hear from us is this long diatribe of what we want. It is as though we are sitting on Santa Claus' lap when we pray and it's not even Christmas.

Even when we pray an intercessory prayer for someone else, you see through the implications. We pray that you will bless others, our country, and heal our land and guide our leaders. Lord, you see that our wish is that all will prosper and prosperity will trickle down on us.

So, Lord, we just ask you this morning, "What do you wish from us? What is the call that you have on the remainder of our living? Where can we serve you in thy kingdom?"

There is so much to do, children who need to have their eyes opened to spiritual dimensions of life. There are people who are lonely and who are grieving the loss of a loved one. If they just had someone to talk to! There are those who are alienated from their true selves and from you. Those who are poor, cold and hungry.

So many needs in creation. If we would but answer your call to serve, thy kingdom would come "on earth as it is in heaven." But Lord, we don't want to just minister to a need, we want to minister where you are calling us. Help us to hear and answer that call. Amen.