

“WHO ARE OUR HEROES?”

Date: July 4, 2010

Text: I Samuel 16: 14-23; II Samuel 18: 24-33

The July 4th weekend provides an opportunity for us to look at scripture and the history of this great nation and pose an interesting question: Who are the heroes of our day? That question became very vivid for me when a few years ago on our trip back from a wedding in Kansas City we stopped at Abraham Lincoln’s museum in Springfield, Illinois. Lincoln really was a humble man who sought God’s guidance and believed deeply that all people are created equal. Viewing his life, I find myself asking: who stands out in our day? Do we honor baseball players who hit so many home runs but may do so because of steroids? Or can you name a movie or TV star who sets a shining example? And do I dare say anything about politicians and the lack of Lioncolnesque figures?

Survey after survey reveals that the American people have few if any individuals they really look up to and seek to follow as examples. Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, maybe one of the Kennedys are honored but they are dead and would you agree that the contemporary list of heroes is quite skimpy? This lack of heroes concerns child psychologists because children model their future dreams upon heroic figures. Adults also need to have people to who they look up to and who set a high and lofty standard of ethical behavior. It is splendid on July 4th weekend to talk of the Mt. Rushmore figures of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Roosevelt but where are the people of similar stature today who will lead us into the future?

Could it be that scripture provides a frame of reference for religious people as we search for models to follow? King David immediately comes to mind as one of the great Biblical heroes. Jesus’ life was very much shaped around expectations for an individual to assume the mantle of this magnificent king.

Most people are familiar with the story of David killing the giant Goliath but he was much more than a brave soldier as we learn when we read parts of his biography from I and II Samuel. Long before he was a great general David was known as a poet and player of the harp. How often do we think of a harpist as the model of masculinity? Hopefully society is getting

better at avoiding stereotypes. Christopher Seaman, director of the Rochester Philharmonic, should be just as much in the limelight as this year's quarterback of the Buffalo Bills, whoever that is going to be, but obviously there is a way to go.

It is important when we talk of heroes to realize that David first came to prominence not because of his ability to fight but because of his ability to offer comfort! He was a caring individual, a good listener possessing the ability to calm the troubled mental state of King Saul. The story reminds me of an incident from the life of Teddy Roosevelt, who usually is portrayed charging up the hill in San Juan Puerto Rico or carrying a big stick. One day he read a book by the sociologist Jacob Riis about living conditions in Hell's Kitchen, a terrible slum in NYC. Roosevelt after finishing the book immediately rushed to see Riis. The author wasn't home but Teddy left a note: "I have read your book. What can I do to help?" David possessed a similar depth of compassion.

Our second reading from Samuel tells of David's reaction upon learning of the death of his son Absalom. Like some parents today David did not have a lot of understanding when it came to raising children. He always was too busy leading armies or administering the government to take time to be a father and his life was marred by misfortune in the lives of his family. Such was their relationship that Absalom actually led a revolt against his father the king. Nevertheless, the news of his son's death devastated David. He wept and wept and cried out: "Absalom, my son! If only I had died in your place." The winsome part of David's personality, unlike so many leaders today, was that he recognized his shortcomings and was truly sorry. He knew he had failed Absalom.

Can you recall a movie where the male hero wept? The greatest Old Testament figure cried disconsolately as any parent in this room would at the death of a beloved son. This is a real human being who made mistakes and who anguished over the resultant tragedy. Of course, he was on the typical ego trip of any great leader and often was selfish but nevertheless his humanity shows through.

Repeatedly Biblical heroes are portrayed warts and all, people with severe imperfections. Even the king's adulterous affair with Bathsheba is part of the picture. Still the message of the Bible is that individuals like David possess the characteristics necessary to lead others. It isn't enough

just to be strong and tough; leaders need compassion and sensitivity. To speak in terms of stereotypes, it isn't enough to have so-called macho traits because feminine characteristics are equally important for the heroes of our day.

Perhaps more important than anything else in shaping David's character, in addition to his multifaceted humanness, was his deep religious faith, a faith that put all else into perspective. It was this sense of partnership with the Divine that gave his life a larger dimension. In both passages read, there are subtle hints that God will be with David and that shall be his source of true power. Abraham Lincoln once made a comment on the eve of an important Civil War battle that has stuck with me. After Lincoln and his generals finished discussing strategy for the next day one of them said, "Mr. President, let us pray that God will be on our side tomorrow." To which Lincoln immediately replied, "I never worry about God being on our side but I do worry a lot about our being on God's side."

Lincoln's comments are not just the familiar clichés of a politician who feels that he must conclude every address with some phrase about God blessing the nation. This is a statement from an individual who believed deeply and tried to live out God's concern for peace and justice. David would share similar convictions.

King David sincerely made every effort to shape his life around what he regarded to be the will of God. More than once he got off the track and fortunately there were people like the prophet Nathan who called him to repentance. And David to his credit, unlike so many other leaders today, confessed his wrongs and asked for forgiveness. There is so much negative stuff in the paper about politics that we forget that there have been people who have stood fast for their convictions despite the consequences. As an example back in the '60's Brooks Hays, a representative from Arkansas and a Southern Baptist, was under enormous pressure when it came to endorsing civil rights legislation but he stood up against segregationist demands even though it cost him the next election. Senator Mark Hatfield of Oregon was another leader who in the 1980's followed his Christian convictions as a long time opponent of the nuclear arms race although that put him at odds with his party and did not help him at home. Aren't these the kind of courageous, moral leaders we are looking for today?

I said at the beginning that July 4th and our proud heritage gives us the opportunity to talk about what kind of heroes we want in the 21st Century. It isn't enough to honor Jefferson, Washington, Lincoln and Roosevelt. We need to look for heroes of the present. Can the characteristics of a Biblical hero such as King David serve as a model for what is needed in leaders today? If we are going to limit terrorism, do something about global warming and close the gap between the rich and poor and provide a decent standard of living for all people, then, we need leaders like David, who was forceful and yet compassionate, strong but sensitive and possessed a deep faith. There is a time for toughness but also a time for tears. The world desperately needs men and women who possess both qualities and who see their lives not lived unto themselves but dedicated to their Creator.

Who are our heroes? That is the question of the morning. Let's remember that it's never enough just to look out into society. We need to look closer to home as well. Hopes for the future never will become realities unless we do our part, unless in many small ways we are willing to become role models for others by trying to shape our lives in partnership with our Creator. In whatever ways that we can, we need to become God's heroes for tomorrow.