

## **“How Great Lives Are Made”**

Isaiah 61:1-4; I Corinthians 2:1-13

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

July 13, 2014 – 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

In an article about Eleanor Roosevelt, columnist Ellen Goodman wrote: “She became a great lady, not because she was a first lady, but because she was able through enormous will to turn her pain into strength, to turn disappointment into purpose. The facts, just the facts of her life, might have defeated any of us.”

What were some of those facts? As a child she had to wear a brace for her back, she was considered an ugly duckling by her mother, and was orphaned at a young age. As a woman she cared for a husband stricken with polio and, after ten years of marriage and six children, she saw him fall in love with another woman.

Yes, in spite of all this, she persevered and remained loyal to her marriage. Without Eleanor it is indeed doubtful that Franklin would have ever become Governor of New York, much less rise to be President of the United States. She may have stood behind this public figure in the public eye but, in truth, she stood aside of him as an equal who helped him reach his fulfillment.

Eleanor Roosevelt had a natural compassion for those in need. On her many trips for the President she was both the legs for her husband and a large part of his social conscience as well. She got involved in programs to help the poor, supported civil rights when it was still an unpopular cause, advocated for the role of women in leadership, and later worked for the benefit of people worldwide through the United Nations.

Arthur Schlesinger paid Eleanor this tribute: “Her life was both ordeal and fulfillment. It combined both vulnerability and stoicism, pathos and pride, frustration and accomplishment, sadness and happiness.”

Great people don't have lives that run completely smooth from start to finish—be they artists or statesmen, educators or industrialists, or just the person next door. Perhaps what separates the great from the near-great is not so much ability, as it is the drive to overcome adversity. Those who have turned around their negatives have found a strength to carry them through to the completion of their goals.

Such a person is like the one whose letter we read in our New Testament lesson today. Saul was a religious purist. He abhorred the idea of a Jewish sect which threatened to take his traditional faith on a heretical tangent. As a Pharisee he became active in suppressing that particular group.

The persecution of Christian leaders was intense at times and many of them fled from Jerusalem. Rather than defeating Christianity, however, this suppression ended up dispersing their influence farther. Congregations began to develop far and wide, and soon spread out from Judea and Galilee to include Ephesus and Antioch and even Rome.

It is in this highly-charged atmosphere that Saul dedicates himself to eradicating the influence of this false Messiah. He may have been as young as his late teens or early twenties, and he is filled with righteous zeal. Yet, from the story of his life, we also know that while on the road one day he is confronted by a vision of Christ in a blinding flash. After that decisive event the prosecutor becomes the proponent.

From this unlikely background Paul, as he comes to be known, writes later to the church at Corinth: "When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God."

Here is one who does not elevate himself, but attributes who he is, and what he has done, to a greater source. His words echo the words of Isaiah in our other scripture for the day when he says, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me." You see, great people know the true source of their greatness. The strength they have flows not so much from them, but through them.

Lest it sound today like we're only talking about the well-known of history, greatness of character is not limited to only the famous. Such persons are found in all walks of life and with all kinds of backgrounds. They are both women and men, and neither their skin color nor nationality have anything to do with who they are.

Here are five characteristics I see in great lives:

- First of all, **great lives have a purpose**. They see themselves fitting into a larger design for life.
- Second, **great lives have a goal**. They have something they want to accomplish.
- Third, **great lives have commitment**. They don't get permanently off course when obstacles get in their way,
- Fourth, **great lives accept limitations**. They know their weaknesses, too, and work around them.
- And, finally, **great lives have faith in a power apart from themselves**. They realize that what they accomplish depends on opening themselves to the strength of a higher source.

It seems to me that these five characteristics are present in lives as diverse as Eleanor Roosevelt and the Apostle Paul. They're also present in others, from Grandma Moses to Martin Luther King, Jr. to Maya Angelou. And the list doesn't stop there. It goes on to include many folks not known outside their hometown or even beyond the smaller circle of their friends and family.

Great people are simply where they are found, and that may be anywhere. If you think about it you probably all could come up with a list of your nominees. On it might be Abraham Lincoln, an influential teacher, and your Aunt Mildred. It might be anyone who fits the description of greatness. Perhaps they might not even consider themselves worthy, but the point is that you do.

Nancy Carpenter would be surprised she is on my list, that is if she were still alive. She was born in Williamstown, Vermont, and married Edwin Baker in 1861. The next year, as age 26, she started to keep a diary. Putting the time in context, the Civil War has begun. Her husband, a seaman, is part of a crew taking a ship for the Federal government from Boston to San Francisco around the tip of South America, the only way then to sail between the two points. It is a long and dangerous mission.

They have only been married a few months when he leaves in August of 1861. What she doesn't know as she starts that diary is that she will not see him again until 1863. Months go by between letters because there is no way on the open sea for him to write her. She misses him greatly and fears the worst. During this time she lives with Edwin's family in Ashby, Massachusetts, and transfers her membership in the Congregational Church from the one back home in Vermont to the one where she now stays.

Here are a few excerpts from her diary in July of 1862, and it will give you a feel for her:

*July 1...Went with Joanna and Martha to make calls. All ask of my husband. O, if they knew the pain it causes they'd never ask again. When will he be at home? Father, grant him a safe return, if it can be Thy will.*

*July 3... Received a box of goodies from Helen....How thankful I should be for such loving friends....*

*July 4...Another anniversary of our national independence, but how many hearts are kept from rejoicing by the [war]....Anxiety such as never known here seems to pervade the whole crowd. Mr. Bell wishes my husband were here to enjoy the day with me. Does he know that my thoughts are all with my loved one?*

*July 5... My letter from the Williamstown Church read before the church [here] and acted upon. The Ashby Church voted to receive me as one of their number. O what feeling of responsibility comes over me that I may prove myself worthy of thy watchful care and fellowship.... I cannot of myself meet this responsibility. O my Father, help me to be an earnest member of this church.*

*July 6.. My first communion as a member of this church.... Somewhat sad, yet calm and peaceful. I feel a new impetus to go forward in the service of Christ. There is a work for each and every follower of Jesus. O for the grace to discern my duty, and strength to perform it aright....*

*July 7... with Martha. She is a dear sister [in-law]. How can I murmur at my lot when I've so many friends. At times I forget the blessings and only see the cloudy sky. Sometimes I forget that I've given up the care of my darling to the care of my heavenly Father and am fearing lest he is sick or some evil has befallen him. I would at all times remember that he is not mine, only lent me as all earthly treasures. God help and guard my Edwin.*

Here is a young woman living in the rather small circle of family, friends, village, and church. She's still young, but already we see a great life developing. While I may never know the final outcome, I recognize all the right signs.

Great lives have five characteristics: They have a purpose. They have a goal. They have commitment. They accept limitations. And they have faith in a power greater than themselves.

Blessed are those who discover greatness in others. Blessed still more are those in whom others can find greatness.