

"The Heroes Among Us"

Ezekiel 2:1-5; Matthew 6:1-6

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

June 21, 2015 – 4th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

Sometimes we wonder where the real heroes are today. Just where we're likely to expect them, in our political leaders for instance, the newspaper headlines again call this to question. If this is a time when there seems to be a particular dearth, it may be important to realize that this is not the first such period in which the world has seemingly been without those of heroic proportions.

The book of Ezekiel, for instance, is written out of a time of extreme turbulence for the Hebrew people. It has been five years since Babylon conquered Jerusalem and carried into exile both the king and 10,000 of Israel's most prominent people.

The year is 592 B.C. and the priest Ezekiel is living in captivity in the Babylonian town of Tel-abib. Referencing our calendar system, on July 21 of that year something so momentous would happen in the life of this particular man that it would change his direction forever. He records it as an oracle of God given to him. Out of this encounter he receives both a clear direction for his life and a message to proclaim.

The words given him are to be directed both to his fellow exiles in Babylon and to those remaining in Jerusalem. It is a harsh message, for it tells of a people fallen away from their beliefs and a national decision which has put them on their way to even greater destruction. The Hebrews have aligned themselves with Egypt and other allies to overthrow Babylon's rule, though Babylon is so strong that the success of such an effort is really impossible.

What condemns the Israelites is not just foolhardiness, but it is the people's falling away from the worship of the Lord in favor of pagan gods. Ezekiel brings a strong warning as God directed him.

Returning to God's first call to Ezekiel to prophesy to his people, we find these words: "..... I am sending you to the people of Israel. They have rebelled and turned against me and are still rebellious, just as their ancestors were. They are stubborn and do not respect me, so I am sending you to tell them what I, the sovereign Lord, am saying to them. Whether these rebels listen to you or not, they will know that a prophet has been among them."

Well, if they did know that such a prophet was indeed among them, few paid attention to his words. Perhaps later, when it was too late, they would realize Ezekiel's importance, the validity of his call, and the truth of his message.

This story is reminiscent of another separated in time by about 600 years. On one occasion Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth. Though his message was the same as he proclaimed elsewhere, we are told that the townspeople rejected him. Seemingly they can only think of him as they knew him once ... as a neighbor, a young carpenter, the eldest son of Mary and Joseph. Surely, they thought, he is one of us and no different. How could he

have any special wisdom? And so when they reject his ministry Jesus sadly observes: "A prophet is respected everywhere except in his own hometown and by his relatives and family."

At one time I worked as a chaplain in the Ohio Department of Youth Services. My facility housed males from 15-18 who were in their last six weeks of incarceration. It was a very specialized program intended for those with addiction problems, either alcohol or drugs. In many cases, both.

I always asked the fellows what they thought would be the hardest things in returning to their home communities. Staying sober was usually the first problem they mentioned, but it was followed closely by having to deal with the perception that others had of them.

Many of these young men changed while they were locked up and wanted to live a straight life, however people back home may not be ready to see them for the new persons they were becoming. Sometimes old reputations are hard to break. It's easy to get pulled backward when others can only see the past person, and not the emerging one.

No doubt the people of Jerusalem during the time of Ezekiel, and in Nazareth when Jesus walked those streets, were looking for heroes. They recognized a need for such persons, but they came away shaking their heads because they weren't to be found. "Where have all the heroes gone?" we hear them say. "Where have all the heroes gone?" we may hear ourselves saying.

Henry Farlie once observed, "If we no longer have any heroes, it may not be because no one is fit to be a hero, but because we are not fit to recognize one." If we no longer have any heroes, it may not be because there aren't any, but because we can't identify them.

In a survey of middle school students, the most popular response to the question "Who is your hero?" was "Nobody." Where a name was given, it was often someone from sports or a video game.

In the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* we do encounter a person who is of heroic dimensions, though he probably doesn't realize it. Atticus Finch is a lawyer in a small Southern town. One day he is called upon to defend a young black man who is accused of attacking a white girl. He agrees to take the case and immediately comes under the abuse and scorn of many in the town. Bravely he goes ahead and defends him anyway.

Finch's two children have come to the courtroom to witness the trial. As there is no more room for them downstairs, they go up into the segregated balcony. The young man is actually innocent and his attorney defends him capably. When the jury comes in, however, nobody up there is surprised that its verdict is guilty.

While the judge retires and the first floor spectators file out of the courtroom Jean, the lawyer's young daughter, intently watches her father. He stands alone in the room, placing papers from the table into his briefcase. Finch puts on his coat and walks down the middle aisle toward the exit. He has lost his case, but his conscience is clear.

Jean is engrossed in watching her father when she feels someone touch her shoulder. She turns around and notices that everyone in the balcony has remained and is standing. A black preacher next to her says in a solemn voice, "Miss Jean, stand up. Your father is passing by."

Some years back Newsweek cited some rather extraordinary persons for the contributions they were making to life. They reached past the obvious and well-known people of our country to such people like Betty and William Pollack who live on a farm in rural Massachusetts.

The Pollacks at that time were foster parents to eighteen children, who ranged in age from 8 to 18. Each was considered a problem placement because of retardation, behavioral difficulties, or physical handicap. All prior foster homes had turned out to be unworkable. This broad assortment of personalities, however, became a family in the truest sense of that word.

The Pollacks laughed when asked about their own heroic deeds and said: "How can you be a hero when you're doing something you like? Heroes are people who do something spectacular like rescuing people, saving their lives. Now that's heroic."

Perhaps heroes are right here around us, and have been all along. Times without appropriate examples may be more a judgment on the people as a whole than on the lack of worthy individuals. There are some in every country; there are some in every community; there are some in every church. We need to open our eyes so that we don't look past them. They don't tend to draw attention to themselves. They don't require notoriety. They're too busy being about their work to stand on a pedestal.

Truth is, there are truly heroic and God-centered people among us. Most aren't saints, but they are faithful. Let's not be deaf to the important message they might bring to us, like Ezekiel committed to do for his people. Let's not dismiss them because they might be close to us and appear rather ordinary, as Jesus was to those in his hometown.

God elects to work in the world through those whom are chosen. Age or sex or skin color are of no concern. In some way each person who strives to follow in faith has something to give to others. And incredible as it may seem, the Lord works for good through you and me despite our doubts, our failings, and our unworthiness for such a high role.

When we begin to see God at work in each other, we begin to understand the power of realized discipleship. When we see God at work in each other, we discover the potential and possibilities that are here, even here, in a congregation as seemingly unremarkable as us.

Where have all the heroes gone? I think a number of them may just happen to be in this very room. Don't look for the haloes, though, at least not yet. Instead, look for evidence of women and men who let God work through them, who put others above self, who reach out to meet the needs of those around them. These are truly people worth listening to and emulating. They may not be heroes in the popular definition, but they are heroes in God's sense of that term.