

"In Search of Heroes"

Psalm 145:10-18; Acts 14:8-18

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

July 1, 2018 – 6th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

Once upon a time a lion was sleeping in its lair when it was awakened by a tiny mouse brushing past. The lion grabbed the little creature with its huge paw and opened its mouth ready to enjoy a tasty snack.

The mouse had to do some quick thinking and noticed that the lion's paw was sore with a thorn sticking out of it. So he said sweetly, "Please, before you eat me, let me pull the thorn from your paw and make it well."

The lion was taken aback, but immediately agreed since he had been suffering for a long time. The thorn was so tiny and deep that he couldn't get at it despite all his strength. The mouse on the other hand was small and agile and had strong teeth, so it didn't take long before the troublesome thorn was out.

Not only was the mouse spared by the grateful lion, but something very unexpected happened: they became good friends. And so, the story goes.

Healers often become heroes. The sufferer is so elated at recovery that he or she is filled with thanks for the one who brought relief. Another example of this can be found in our New Testament reading from Acts today. It describes how Barnabus and Paul healed a crippled man. Almost immediately the crowd looked upon the two apostles with awe because of the miracle.

The people shouted, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" They called Barnabus "Zeus" and Paul "Hermes." The people were just about ready to offer sacrifice to them when Paul protested, "Friends, why are you doing this?" The two men protested the intention of the people; but even so they were barely able to keep the crowd restrained.

The urge to raise up and deify certain individuals seems to be part of the human makeup. We want larger-than-life problem solvers that we can go to in times of need. It's as true today as it was two thousand years ago. We see it in our sports. We see it in our military. We see it in our politics.

Now true heroes are actually very important in every culture because they provide us with role models for living. America is no exception. We clearly have heroes who stand out from our past, but we may be less sure about who they are today. Young people are even more uncertain about where to look. Polls indicate that the immediate fame of a current celebrity is often confused with the strong characteristics found in traditional heroes.

Take sports figures as an example. We look at those whose main attributes may be size and coordination and try to make them superstars in life as well as on the field. Everywhere they go they are surrounded by photographers, reporters, and autograph seekers. People hang on their every word even when they aren't particularly articulate.

Their exploits are told in newspaper headlines, featured in sports magazines, and reported endlessly on radio and TV. They're sought out eagerly for product endorsements. People talk about them at work, at school, and around the supper table.

Imagine having your name announced over a stadium PA system as 90,000 people rise to their feet and cheer their lungs out for you. It would be easy to get the feeling that you're invincible. Now when that happens, and you're only 19, it can skew your sense of importance and privilege in the world.

Perhaps that's why so many athletes run afoul of the law these days. It's natural to conclude that if you're someone special, you get special advantages. Laws and proper conduct are for ordinary mortals, not for somebody who has appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*.

We've been dismayed in the last few years by Ohio State athletes who have been suspended from play or dropped from the team altogether. And OSU isn't unique with this problem. Certainly some of this stems from the constant adulation that inflates the ego and blinds these young athletes to their human shortcomings.

Back some years ago there was a Midwestern football player who had been all-state in three sports in high school, as well as yearbook editor and the prom king. Not surprisingly he was one of the most popular boys in his class.

When he got to a Big Ten university this fellow lived up to his billing. By his junior year he was a starting end, led the team in touchdown receptions, and carried a high classroom average. In most everyone's eyes he was a great success. Everything in his public life seemed to be going right.

But there was a problem, a secret and terrible one. As fall practice began in his senior year, far away from the cheering crowds, the cadre of reporters, the adulating alumni a distraught young man took his own life.

The news shocked the country, but those closest to this sensitive young man knew he was tired of the limelight and hurt by sharp criticism whenever he failed to turn in a top performance. Here was a fellow who just wanted to play football and not be a celebrity. He longed to simply be a good guy who loved the game.

It's no wonder that when people are treated like gods, they usually accept it completely or they reject it totally. There's not much in the middle. We all know those who bask in this adulation and seem to thrive by all the attention. Just like drug addicts, they need their daily high.

"Friends," protested Paul, "Why are you doing this? Aren't we human just like you? We're not some mythical gods. Don't you see that any power that we have is a power that comes from outside ourselves. We aren't the source; we simply point to the source. God is the power behind the healing you witnessed today. We do nothing on our own. Open your eyes that you might see the real truth. Put your adulation where it belongs."

Paul and Barnabus would have satisfied the crowd had they accepted the glory offered to them. The people saw their appearance as providential. It was a bit of excitement in their

otherwise dull lives. If you read on in the text however, you'll discover that the fickle crowd turns on them when the apostles then refuse the honor they seek to give. This is a reminder that fame is fleeting and those who grant it quickly can withdraw it just as easily.

True heroes are most often ordinary people who do extraordinary things. What sets them apart is that they act with high concern for the critical needs of others. Some heroes are identified with a brief moment in history while others reflect a lifetime of devoted service. In either case, heroism is not something that can be earned; rather, it is an attribute that can only be bestowed. Most often, such persons act with tremendous courage when critical moments present themselves.

A United Airlines flight left Newark airport on a beautiful fall day in 2001, only to be taken over by a team of men bent on using the aircraft as a weapon to make a dramatic statement.

Those aboard flight #93, through their contact by cell phones with friends and family, possessed a clear notion of what the terrorists intended. Two of those passengers, Tom Burnett and Todd Beamer, became American heroes that fateful day....

Burnett of San Ramon, California, spoke with his wife four times by phone. His last words to her were, "Don't worry. We're going to do something. I've got to go." Tom was driven by moral necessity to act. Later, CNN interviews with Tom's wife and parents testified to Tom's upbringing and his sense of purpose when facing adversity.

Todd Beamer of New Jersey prayed the Lord's Prayer before uttering his final words, "Let's roll." Tom and Todd displayed the highest degree of integrity. They knew that everyone aboard flight #93, as well as countless others at the terrorists' ultimate target, would die if they did nothing. They assessed the situation correctly, weighed their options, said goodbye to loved ones, and then took the necessary action.

While all aboard perished that day in rural Pennsylvania that day, they forced the hijackers to stop their intention to strike the White House. Beamer, Burnett, the crew and other passengers did the right thing at the right time. All were later awarded Congressional Gold Medals that were given to their families.

Whatever a hero shows outwardly is a picture of what is on the inside of that person. You can fail to use what you are capable of doing; but, in the flick of a moment, you can't become what you aren't.

Heroes, too, can differentiate between what is of their doing, and what comes from a source deep within. They don't bring attention to themselves for their own glory, but serve as a witness to a greater good working through them. This is the story of Tom and Todd flying over Pennsylvania, but also the story of Paul and Barnabus ministering in the region of Lystra.

Though we will hopefully never be in such dire straits as those aboard Flight 93, what happened there can speak directly to our lives as well. When we realize God to be at our center, then the good that we do in life is a reflection of all that we believe. There is a balance between our values and our actions. When we approach life in this way we can be heroic in

our living, in both little ways and big. Allowing God to work through us is visible evidence of what it is to be Christ's disciple in today's world.

When the chips are down, that's the very time for us to show the stuff of which we are made. It's an opportunity to live our faith with daring because we have an inner strength and through this to act on our convictions.

Real heroes have little to do with titles or position, but everything to do with what we believe and have the determination to do.