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"ON HAVING A HERO"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
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INTRODUCTION

The chances are that before we go to bed tonight, sports' writers and football fans will have a new hero. I wonder... who will it be? Whoever it is, his name will be recorded in the annals of Super Bowl history...like Joe Namath's name was 30 years ago. Heroes...America loves its heroes....which reminds me of something I came across recently...that people today "worship" celebrities, but have few heroes. I wonder if that's true.

Much has been written since the untimely death of Princess Diana about the burden of being a celebrity. Did you know that recent studies show that most Americans don't even want to be famous. Apparently the loss of personal freedom that celebrities must endure can be costly and upsetting.

Singer Olivia Newton John wanted to buy her husband a birthday present while she was visiting an old friend by the name of Faye in Portland, Oregon. They went to the mall, knowing that if the famous singer were recognized that things might get a little hectic. Olivia said,

"Don't worry, we'll deal with it if it happens". And sure enough, they were in a shop when they noticed two women eyeing them. One of the women said, "Go on..ask her". The other said, "No...you ask her". Finally one of them came forward and said, "Excuse me"....(looking in the direction of Olivia Newton John's friend)... "Isn't your name Faye...weren't you in my class in grade school?"

A professor of classics at a major university was teaching his students about the heroes of Greek legend. He tried without success to get them to talk about their concept of a hero. Finally, he resorted to asking if anyone could name a hero whereupon only one student, a girl, raised her hand and said, "Yes... Dustin Hoffman".

Well, Dustin Hoffman is one of our finest actors, but a hero? Sammy Sosa and Mark McGwire have become baseball's newest heroes and they seem to be fine men of remarkable athletic ability. They came along at a great time for baseball and perhaps for the nation as well. Do you have a hero? Who is it?

A NEED TO LOOK UP TO SOMEBODY

Put this thought down, first...we all seem to have a need to look up to somebody. We seem to have a need to identify with someone who can do something we can't do. It might be an athlete, an attractive movie star, a famous business person, a politician, but there's something with us that needs to have a hero.

Speaking of having someone to look up to, there was a humorous article in the papers not too long ago about the NBA's biggest man, Washington's 7 foot 7 Gheorghe Muresan. Muresan is big enough to frighten some NBA players and bears don't like him either. Seems that during a recent visit to the Washington Zoo, a bear ran for his cave as Muresan approached. His interpreter is said to have observed,

"We tried it a few more times and every time he showed up the bear ran to his cave...." Now...there is a man you can look up to...a man so large that even bears in a zoon turn and run away!

This tendency to worship celebrities is not entirely new. Marie Antoinette, the First Lady of Louis XVI, was the celebrity "style-maker" of the 18th century. They say that if she styled her wig in a particular fashion, all the ladies of the court were soon wearing their hair the same way. And when she became pregnant, the best-dressed women of Paris and Versailles wore cushions under their gowns in imitation. For nine months they inserted larger and larger cushions to keep pace with Marie's expansion, but then suddenly, with the birth of her son, all cushions became passe...and the style changed.

There is something in the human psyche that needs someone to look up to, someone with whom to identify, someone even to imitate. Raise a hand if you have a hero? Who is it?

LEGITIMATE HEROES

There are some legitimate heroes in our world...people who lives courageous and compassionate lives...who make a meaningful contribution to life and society. "Service to others is the rent I pay for my space on earth". Who was it who said that? Any idea. Muhammed Ali.

Senator Barbara Jordan has been a hero to many. She had a trail-blazing career as the first woman and the only black person so far to represent the state of Texas in the Senate. When she first entered politics, she had to overcome all sorts of outmoded attitudes, but her fairness and her strong commitment to justice won her respect from both political parties.

Senator Barbara Jordan may have never known how her example inspired others. It's been said that a little black girl use to pass Barbara Jordan's childhood home every day and think to herself, "Barbara Jordan grew up here, too". The thought inspired her and that little black girl grew up to be Ruth Simmons, the President of Smith College.

We all need heroes to inspire us. Of course, Joran became a celebrity as well as a hero. Many other heroes are never known to the general public, but the world is better off because they were here.

The story is told about a judge who lived on a ranch near Dallas. When the judge died, his funeral was held at the ranch. There were so many flowers that two trucks were needed to transfer them to the cemetery. As the flowers were being put on the trucks, a friend turned to an old man who had worked on the ranch for many years and said to him,

"The Judge certainly received a lot of flowers, didn't he?" The man replied, "Yes, sir...her did, but you know the Judge has been planting the seeds for those flowers a long, long time."

I don't know the judge's name, but my guess would be that he was something of a hero to a good many people. Do you have a hero? Who is it...with whom do you identify. Who is it that you try to be like?

MOSES AND ELIJAH WERE HEROES

Let's come back to the text for today's sermon. It's the story of the Transfiguration. It brings two Old Testament heroes on to the pages of the New Testament, to be linked with the name of Jesus. Moses and Elijah...two very influential men.

Did you know that their stories are told in three of the great faiths of the world - Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Moses was the man who went on the mountain to receive the tablet from God - those tablets we know as the Ten Commandments, and not the Ten Suggestions. And Elijah was the great prophet of Israel - a man of "heroic" proportions. It is highly significant that when the Disciples saw Jesus in this experience that we know of as the Transfiguration, that He was there in the presence of Moses and Elijah.

Most of you are familiar with this story. We've preached on it at this time in years gone by. Jesus took Peter and James and his brother, John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And while they were on the mountain, something quite extraordinary happened. As the three disciples looked at their Master, His face, they said, began to shine like the sun and his clothes became a dazzling white. And then suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Then it was that Peter said to Jesus,

"Lord....it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for You, one for Moses and one for Elijah".

And while Peter was still speaking, a bright cloud suddenly overshadowed them and from the cloud a voice was heard that said,

"This is My Son, the Beloved. With Him, I am well pleased. Listen to Him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome with fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid!" And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus, Himself....alone.

As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus ordered them to tell no one about this vision until after the Son of Man had been raised from the dead. Down from the mountain, now.....who do you suppose became the hero of those disciples?

Yes, Jesus and friend, if you do not have a hero, let me recommend Him to you. If a hero is someone that you look up to....someone with whom you identify, and even try to imitate, let me recommend Jesus to you for a bit of "hero-worship". And there are two reasons I would suggest to you for making Him your hero.

OTHER HEROES WILL LET YOU DOWN

The first reason....I think you'll discover that other heroes will let you down. The truth of the matter is that no matter how remarkable your hero may be, he or she is still human. They still make their mistakes.

There was a time when heroes could be invented, made for us. Raise a hand if you remember ~~those~~ more naive times when the press did not report on our heroes' short-comings. There was a time when the media would often exaggerate the strengths of famous people and ignore their weaknesses. Politically that was true all the way up to Watergate, but now-a-days it seems like things are reversed. We see our heroes' weaknesses and their strengths are minimized. Even when we see a celebrity in a favorable light, we don't know how much is hype.... how much is real and how much is just a lot of PR.

There's a book called Surface Chic. It's a book that gives a tongue-in-cheek treatment of wealth, fame and power. Among other things, the book contains some paper watch faces that simulate an \$ 11,000 Corum watch. You can cut these watch faces out and paste them on your \$ 11.00 watch. According to this book, by doing this, your friends will be impressed with both your good taste and your great wealth. That's what the authores mean by "surface chic". Many celebrities today are no more than surface chic and so often when we get a closer look, we become disappointed.

A pretty good reason to make Christ your "HERO" is that other heroes can so easily let you down and I don't think Christ ever will.

CHRIST CAN MAKE A HERO OUT OF YOU

And the second reason to make Christ your hero is that Christ, believe it or not, can make a hero out of you. For when you look to Christ as the object of your worship, when you identify with Him, and even seek to imitate Him, you find that you are drawn to the heroic, too.

Gladys Aylward, a missionary to China fifty years ago, was forced to leave her missionary work when the Japanese invaded Yangcheng. In fleeing certain death, she led nearly a hundred orphan children over the mountains to Free China. It was a frightening journey and at times, she was burdened with despair. One morning after a sleepless night, and fearing that they would never reach safety, she shared her feelings of hopelessness with the children. A 13 year old girl reminded her of their "much loved" story of Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea.

"But I am not Moses" replied Gladys Aylward. "Of course you aren't" responded the 13 year old, "But Jehovah is still God."

She made a pretty good point! In other words, why "worship" our heroes, if our heroes can't help us across life's turbulent waters and through life's dark valleys. If our heroes cannot help us become "heroes", then perhaps we need to look for heroes who can. And Christ can help us in that regard. His spirit can enter our lives...touch our spirits...and make us into people who can walk with courage and hope....who can help us accomplish more good things than we ever dreamed possible. I feel that's the best kind of hero to have.

Sir Winston Churchill knew the difference between a celebrity and a hero. Back in the summer of 1941, a Sergeant James Allen was awarded the Victoria Cross for an act of heroism...he climbed out onto the wing of the Wellington bomber on which he was flying and at 13,000 feet above the ground he managed to put out a fire in the starboard engine. Secured only by a rope around his waist, he managed to smother the fire and return along the wing to the cabin of the aircraft. Churchill, something of an admirer as well as a performer of "swash-buckling" exploits, summoned the shy New Zealander to Number Ten Downing Street. James Ward, struck dumb with awe in Churchill's presence, was unable to answer the questions of the Prime Minister. Churchill surveyed the shy and unhappy hero with some compassion and said to him,

"You must feel very humble and awkward in my presence".
"Yes, Sir" managed Ward...."Then" said Churchill, "You can imagine how humble and awkward I feel in yours..."

Churchill knew he was in the presence of a real hero...not a celebrity for the season. A real hero. And so, too, did the disciples of Jesus that day long ago. In fact, I think they knew that they were in the presence of someone whose significance went 'way beyond a seasonal celebrity...even beyond the heroic. This was a turning point for they saw Him now as their Lord, their Master, their King...one to follow and place all their faith in. And, if we are wise, He will do the same...and let Him be our hero, too.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence, once again, O God...as we come to the quiet closing moments of this service. Wrestle with us below the surface of our lives...where so often feelings of fear and indecision, lack of faith and lack of daring get rooted in to our lives. Help us to commit ourselves fully to follow the heroic stature of Him whom we call Lord, Master and King. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.