

All Saints Sunday

November 1, 2009

O God be in my mouth as I speak for you and fill this place with your great grace, that we may leave this place less of what we used to be and more of what we ought to be, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

Have you ever thought about the difference between a hero and a saint?

I have been guilty of making the mistake that saints and heroes are the same sort of people.

In fact when I attended parochial school in the late 70's, the nuns made sure that I understood, in no uncertain terms, (this usually included threats about going to hell) that my only heroes should be saints.

Growing up I saw little difference between St. Francis of Assisi and William Wallace of Braveheart.

But a recent book on Christian Ethics by Sam Wells called *Improvisation* helped me to see a different side of debate on the difference between celebrities/heroes and true saints.

And on All Saints Sunday, I thought it would be helpful to you to share a few passages from Well's book.

He writes, "There is a significant difference between the kind of story that is told about heroes and the kind of story that is told about saints.

The Heroes always makes a decisive intervention at a moment when things are looking like they will go badly wrong. The hero steps up and makes everything turn out right.

He is always at the center of the story.

You have probably seen this type of figure in the western movies of John Wayne, or Clint Eastwood.

They ride into town at just the right moment to stand against the bad guys, usually taking the side of farmers against the evil land grabbing cattle barons.

By contrast, Wells writes the saint is not necessarily a crucial character.

In fact they may in some circumstances be almost invisible, easily missed, quickly forgotten.

Think of our reading from Ecclesiastes, some famous or in the authors opinion Godly people have left a name for us to remember and some have not.

This does not for the author of our OT reading make those men or women any less noteworthy.

They are in fact, true men and women of mercy whose righteous deeds shall not be forgotten.

The hero's story though is always about the hero.

The saint though is always at the periphery of a story that is really about God taking action to save our world or God's people...

The hero's story is told to celebrate the virtues of the hero. The hero's strength, courage, wisdom, or great timing; such are the qualities on which the hero's decisive intervention rests.

By contrast the saint may not be strong, brave, clever or opportunistic. But the saint has one thing going for him that the hero does not, the saint is faithful.

Think of St. Paul for a moment, no one ever accused him of being the best debater or evangelist.

In fact most of his contemporaries said Apollos, who is mentioned in First Corinthians, was a more dashing charismatic figure, yet Paul was faithful, and Paul was determined to get his message about Jesus out to the people.

And 2,000 years later, we still as Christians ready and respond to his message about our savior

Even the contemporary icons we use in stories to represent the hero or saint are different.

He writes that the definitive heroic icon for our time is the soldier, who is prepared to risk death for the sake of the higher good, remember earlier when I mentioned William Wallace fighting for the freedom of Scotland....

Of course, the hero's story assumes that in a world of limited resources there is bound to be conflict.

But the saints of God assume a different story about the world.

They do not need to learn how to fight over competing goods, because Christ has fought for and secured the true good, and the goods that truly matter now are not limited or in short supply.

Love, joy, peace, faithfulness, gentleness—these do not rise or fall on the stock market. These are the values that the saint is willing to live out in the world even if it involves the sacrifice of their life.

The saint's story does not presuppose scarcity; it does not require the perpetuation of violence to secure the world for us.

Whereas the icon of the heroism is the soldier, the icon of holiness or faithfulness is the martyr.

The soldier faces death in battle, the saint faces death by not going to battle and standing up to the powers and principalities of this world.

The soldier's heroism is its own reward; their story makes sense in any language that respects nobility and aspires to greatness.

And as someone who grew up admiring stories about the twelve labors of Hercules, Perseus facing Medusa, and Jason and the Argonaut's quest for the Golden Fleece, I understand the human need we have to hear these epic tales and celebrate those types of virtues.

At some level we all need to hear stories like this and to realize that some human beings are able to achieve great things, against all odds, even when the Greek gods themselves or "the establishment" were arrayed against them.

However, the martyr's holiness in our fallen world makes no sense unless rewarded by God; it has no place in any story except that of Christ's redeeming sacrifice and the martyr's heavenly crown.

And this too we can relate too in a world that still experiences suffering and pain.

Good faithful people are crucified every day for standing up against injustice, oppression and the endless cycle of violence and hate that permeate our world.

And while the hero might stand alone against the injustice of the world, the story of God is according to Wells slightly different.

God expects a response from his disciples that they cannot give on their own.

The saints of this world depend not only on God, but on one another for resources that can sustain faithful lives, and they discover that their dependence on one another is not a handicap but is central to their witness to God's love and God's faithfulness....

Saints are, unlike the hero, never alone.

This is a difficult idea to get across in our Western Culture. Much of our celebration of celebrities like Brad Pitt or athletes like Alex Rodriguez rest upon this notion of hero worship. .

But on All Saints Sunday, we celebrate a deeper truth about what it means to be faithful.

It is a countercultural message in the truest sense. We proclaim a truth based on our mutual dependence and support for each other as members of the Christian church.

Jesus you may recall did not set out to save the world alone. He called faithful apostles and followers like Mary and Martha of Bethany to be with him and to take his message to a suffering world.

Jesus' example is the same for us, and I believe that our Christian faith must be lived out in community as part of this church.

None of us are called to be heroes but we are all called to be God's Saints.

Maybe you have wondered why baptisms are always recommended on All Saints Sunday?

It is because in the sacrament of holy baptism a child or adult are incorporated into the community of saints, a life shaped by Christ and dependent upon the life that we share together in this church.

There is no greater witness to the difference between hero and saint than when we all together proclaim our willingness in the baptismal covenant to support and uphold this person in their new life in Christ.

The promises we make in baptism assume, demand and require community—a special kind of community, the communion of the saints.

And this communion of saints, past, present, and yet to come, is what sustains our Christian lives and gives us the hope and the strength we need, to be God's holy people in this world and in the life which is to come.