

Hero Worship

Sermon

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Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-12, 17-31, 11:39-12:2

In order to be ordained in the United Church of Christ, one must submit to a battery of psychological examinations. It is a prospect that no one in her right mind would relish, and nor did I.

My objections to the examinations were many. For one thing, my examiner would have an artificial upper hand on me. He was probably no more psychologically sound than me, yet he would get to posit himself my judge and jury. And people in that position always seem prone to push their advantage.

For another thing, the examinations constituted a possible roadblock to my vocational calling. If I flunked them, I would never be able to serve as a pastor. What's more, how would it look that the reason being was that I flunked psychological examinations? Talk about a stigma to bear.

But my principle objection to the examinations was that I fully knew myself to be something of an extremist, and I didn't want my extremism exposed and probed. It seemed like unnecessary hassle and humiliation. I knew I had it under control. I knew I was not a threat to myself or others. We extremists just want to be left to our own extremity.

To avoid the exposure of my extremism, I determined to answer all questions as blandly as possible. I was first subjected to two written tests. The first test asked me to respond free associatively to a long list of words. To the word "blue" I responded "sky." To the word "lost" I responded "keys." To the word "death" I responded initially "darkness," but quickly changed my answer to the more bland "finitude" so as not to raise concern. The test went on this way.

The second test asked me to rate from 1 to 10 how well a given word described me -- 1 being not at all, and 10 being perfectly. When I encountered a word that could by any stretch of the imagination indicate extremism, I gave it a low number. For instance, to the word "passionate" I responded with a 4. To the word energetic, with a 3, and so forth.

After the written tests I was asked to color pictures of my family and my most recurring dream. I chose a number of bland shades and set about coloring innocuous pictures.

Before long the examiner had my results. "Your examinations are consistent," he said. "You appear to be something of an extremist." I was stunned. How could I have let the cat out of the bag? But I played dumb. "An extremist?!" I exclaimed. "What in the world does that mean?" "For instance," he continued, "do you have an issue with hero worship?"

I instantly saw my opportunity to gain ground. "Well I worship a certain hero named Jesus Christ," I replied, "but I would think that would well dispose me for my vocational

calling.” The examiner seemed satisfied. And it’s a good thing, because he didn’t know the half. In my extremism I have brought hero worship to new heights.

Because I am first and foremost a Christian in my identity and interest and passion, my issue with hero worship attaches to Jesus Christ, to be sure, but it also attaches to the heroes of the faith – the noble company of martyrs who witnessed to the courage that true faith engenders; the great theologians who articulated how the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth accomplished human salvation; the artists, poets, and musicians, who through the centuries and inspired by the Holy Spirit, shaped and beautified our culture; those who took up the work of Jesus’ own ministry, and spent their days striving for social justice and caring for the world’s victims. I adulate these heroes. I study them endlessly, talk about them over much, and cover the walls of my home with their pictures and portraits. Yes, I have an issue with hero worship. Especially now that I passed the examinations, and am almost irrevocably ordained, I will freely admit it.

As an avowed hero worshipper then, I was eager to preach on this morning’s lectionary text, the famous “clouds of witness” passage from the letter to the Hebrews. Not surprisingly, this passage, which is an eloquent doxology for the heroes of the faith, is one of my favorites in the entire Bible. I must have read it 1000 times. That is why I was surprised when I was *rereading* it to prepare this sermon, to find myself stumble over one verse. It was a verse I’d never noticed before. It was a verse that in my prior 1000 readings of the passage I must have overlooked. I’d overlooked it I suppose because I had been reading the passage as I was predisposed to read it, as an eloquent doxology for the

heroes of the faith, as a tribute, and not for what it was really saying about them. But despite my own containment of the word of God, I stumbled over a verse, and it broke through.

I stumbled right at the end of chapter eleven where the author of the letter of the Hebrews writes, “They, apart from us, would not be made perfect.” Now the author had just finished extolling the glorious faith witnesses of, among others, Abraham and Moses, and he then concludes that *they* apart from *us* would not be made perfect. Didn’t he have it precisely backward, I thought? The heroes of the faith sustain, enrich, enliven, and inspire *our* faith. They help us to make *our ways* and to complete *our* journeys. They help to perfect *us*, not vice versa. What could I possibly do to perfect the contribution of Abraham or Moses?

Abraham, who heard the call of an unknown God and left everything behind to follow him. Abraham who entered into a covenant with this unknown God faithful that this unknown God would make good on the outlandish promises he had made to him.

Abraham, whose faith was so great that he was prepared to sacrifice Isaac, his beloved son and sole heir to God’s promises, still confident that God would make good on his promises even in the face of the unbearable and the impossible.

Or Moses, who after a direct encounter with and commission from god went toe to toe with the most powerful man in the ancient world and demanded the release of his slaves. Moses, who parted a sea to aid in their escape, who led them forty years in the wilderness

toward the land that God had promise them, and who en route receive the Ten Commandments. It strikes me that Abraham's and Moses' achievements scarcely need my capstone upon their contributions.

But the passage clearly states that *they*, apart from *us*, would not be made perfect. How could that be? As I reflected about it, I began to realize that this passage is not, as I had thought, merely an eloquent doxology of grateful praise for the heroes of the faith. It is no mere tribute. It is much more.

Our God is a God who has made promises to us great beyond our wildest imaginings or desserts – He has promised that his cosmos is not some random accident, but his very own, created through his wisdom, according to his design, and moving toward the fulfillment of his purpose. He has promised that though we have sinned and fallen short of his glory, that his purpose for us is nothing less than redemption and salvation, nothing less than our sharing in his eternity. When our God took flesh and came among us, he sealed his promise and inaugurated his kingdom in our time and history. But yet, at the same time, his kingdom, though inaugurated, is yet to fully come. We, like our forbears, await and anticipate the fullness of God's kingdom, the completion of God's promises to us. But God's action in our history has defined our history. God's action in our history has made our history a salvation history, a salvation history that advances toward God's inevitable victory.

And what makes the heroes of our faith, the cloud of witnesses so great, what inspired them so nobly, is simply that they knew this. They knew it as pervasively as faith permits one to know – in their hearts and minds and souls. They witnessed as they did, and they met with distinction and courage whatever their moments in history demanded from them, because they grasped in faith the certainty and inevitability of God's promised victory in this salvation history.

But it is precisely *because* ours is a salvation history that their faith witnesses can never be thought of as self-contained or by-gone. It is precisely because ours is a salvation history that their faith witnesses can never be thought of as back there somewhere. Because ours is a salvation history, their faith witnesses imply and necessitate that their sacred work be taken up by us.

They did their best for God, but they also did their best for us, convicted that we would continue to advance God's cause in this salvation history until in his own time his victory is won. In this sense, it is *sobering* to realize that we do indeed complete and fulfill their contributions. We move their contributions onward in this salvation history toward God's purpose, toward God's fulfillment, toward God's victory – towards God's perfection.

The phrase then that caused me to stumble did so because I had been reading the passage essentially as a tribute and not for what it is, which is a *clarion* call to response and responsibility – to God, to our forbears, and to our successors.

We have been handed a bright torch, which we carry for our span in God's salvation history before we pass it on, advancing it toward God's perfection. The heroes of our faith, the clouds of witness, have given us their magnificent achievements, and now from us much is expected. Let us pray this morning as they did 2,000 years ago that we may be worthy and strong to run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking always to our Lord Jesus Christ as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Amen.

