

John 3:14-21

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.’

And the Hero Comes Along

Rev. Charles Schuster

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You begin to wonder what's going on in our country. Harry Potter, J. J. Rowling, what has she given us? People lined to see the movie late at night a couple weeks ago. Is Dumbledore God? Is Harry Potter Christ? And are we looking for a hero, any hero, even one who flies around on a broom? Haven't we always kind of needed a hero? Isn't that what the fourth Gospel is giving us, in a way? The Gospel of John, saying God so loved the world that God gave us this only son, and we believe in that son Jesus, and we believe we see him. We believe we see him in the heroes of our day. As Jesus said, "I am the way, I am the truth, believe in me" in John's Gospel, very firm.

But isn't this matter of incarnation and Eucharist a message that says, "Take this, and I live in you," as he gave the bread and the cup. "You see God in me. Take this, and see God in yourselves, and see God in each other." We look for a hero. Norman Lear, TV producer, gave us Archie Bunker and the movies *Stand By Me* and *Fried Green Tomatoes* and TV shows like *ER* and *The Jeffersons* and *Sanford and Son* and *Maude*. Norman Lear said, "As a student of the American psyche, at no time in my life can I remember a culture being so estranged from an essential part of itself." And Arthur Schlesinger, an historian, wrote, "Ours is an era without heroes, an age without great people, an age without definition, whereas belief in great people is able to communicate that individuals can make a difference." Without belief in great people, the message is that individuals are assured they cannot make a difference.

This week the space shuttle landed. It will not fly again. Speaking of heroes in the past. So this morning, I want to go on a search for that part of our culture from which we are estranged. I want to have us be in touch with the heroic, because if we can recapture the heroic, maybe again we can be convinced that we can make a difference, that individuals can make a difference. Richard Bach in his book *Illusions* wrote, "Argue for your limitations, and sure enough, they're yours." If all we do is consider the mediocrity, then we become conformed to it as a norm. But if what we do is lift up the possible, we become advocates for what is impossible. If all we do is to reach the limit of our grasp, we never exceed it. We must be encouraged to stretch. We must be convinced to evolve. We must tap into the potential. Otherwise, we settle for the possible, and wonder where the adventure went.

Greatness, great people, heroes, where are they? Who are they? They exist, you know. Greatness, the heroic, it's about them. In other people, how they reach, dream hope, evolve. God so loved the world that God sent them. Sometimes the hero is somebody else. Did you ever know somebody who was great? Who was really something else? It's about them. Ever know somebody who was good at what they did, so good they eclipsed everybody else? I heard a woman sing one time. I heard other people sing, I've sung a bit myself. I sing like I play the trombone. I've heard dogs howl when some people sing. I've heard strange sounds when some people sing.

But I hear a woman sing. The type of music she was singing was not the kind I really like to hear. It was classic in style, and you won't hear me humming the Grand March from Aida on the way to church. And when I'm away from anyone else, I won't be whistling Mozart. But it was on a Sunday night. It was in March. It was years ago. I went to hear a woman sing. The woman was Marian Anderson. The place was the Coliseum. It's where they play ice hockey, and the place was packed. A great big hall. She seemed so little, until she opened her mouth, and then what came out was effortless. It filled the hall. In fact, the roof was too low. Her voice was bigger than the biggest Coliseum in the state. It could have shattered glass. I heard a woman sing, and she was something else. You and I are going to hear a woman sing just a little bit. We're going to hear Stacy Miller sing. She's a hero. She's something else. It's about them.

Did you ever hear a preacher preach? I heard a preacher take this congregation by the throat, and wrap us around the Gospel until, when he had finished, we felt judged and juried, and by the grace of God free from sin for another day. He spoke words like Mesopotamia brought tears to my eyes. He talked about the widow's mite, and I wanted to give her interest on her two cents that she put on the altar, compounded hourly. We all heard Eugene Lowry preach, about a year and a half ago on Commitment Sunday. His sermon began sitting up here on the pulpit like a baked apple, and then it sprang to life. And before that service was over, in a skillful use of alliteration and talk, without a note in his hand, and a message in his head, the words rolled off his tongue like mud slides on a mountain pass, and before he finished, I had signed a pledge card with more money than I had, and others must have done the same, because we got the largest pledge total in history. Finally we had to say to the congregation, "Stop, we don't know how to spend it all." And when that service was over, we were looking for Hittites to go attack, because we knew they were out there in the grass. We heard Eugene Lowry's narrative preaching a year and a half ago and he's something else, but he does it better.

God so loved the world that God gave to us. Jesus said, "Take the cup, take the bread, I'm in you." The hero, it's all about them. If you were to ask Jesus, "Who is your hero?" I think he would have said two people. I think he would have said John the Baptist, and I also think he would have said Elijah. Elijah was something else. His name means, "Yahweh is God." That's what Elijah means. Elijah once brought down lightning from the sky and turned a mock worship into sparks and thunder. Elijah is the one who got into the face of his people, and he said to them, "You've got to stop limping around after your false Gods. If the Lord is God, follow God, and if you want to worship something else, don't pretend it's God because it isn't." You could hear a pin drop. You could see the world stop and the sun go dark and people who thought they were above the law all of a sudden realize that they were coming back down to earth, and people who

thought they had lost it all at once began to find it. Elijah was something else, and Jesus saw greatness in him, and Jesus was impressed. In fact, Jesus was so impressed that some people think that when he was on the cross, he called out the name Elijah, "Eli, Eli."

There are these people who are in our lives, and they're something else. We may not be able to sing like Marian Anderson, but when we hear her voice, we cannot sing like once we did. We may not be able to preach like Eugene Lowry, but once we hear him preach, we cannot live as once we had. We may not be as persuasive as Elijah, but once we understand his influence, we cannot but stop limping around after our false gods. We've got to ask ourselves the question, is the God we worship really God? These people have a greatness, and we see it. They're something else. God so loved the world, God sent these folks. The hero. It's inside us. It's about us.

Somebody show us the hero in ourselves, secondly, that we are something else, that we are something special. For God so loved the world. It isn't enough to be impressed by the greatness of others, though that's impressive and important. Some people have the ability to help us see the gift within us, to see that we are something special. There are those around us who are able to help us see that, that we are gifted. There are so many messages that we get, and people telling us and reminding us of our greatness is important. So many messages we get. If you leave the church this morning, you may see them. The Fort Collins police have put these, they look like basketball scoreboards, and they've got the speed limit there, and when you get close to them with your car, it begins to blink, showing you how much faster you're going. You can be on a bicycle and the thing blinks. You can walk and the thing blinks. And the message is subtle, but it's there. It says, "We've got you. We can get your name and your number and give you a ticket." That's the kind of message we get.

There's a little girl finished her first week of school and said to her mother, "I'm just wasting my time there. I can't read, I can't write, and they won't let me talk." We need the hero to remind us of the heroic inside us, that we are something special, that we can read, and we can write, and we will talk. Willa Cather, a writer, she helped form the American ethos. Her genius was as a writer, she was able to convey the giftedness of the very ordinary. She was able to help her readers see in themselves as the reader is reading this short story Anton Rosicky, she writes about that which is in all of us. Anton was a man whose accomplishments were not great, but who would rather put smiles on children's faces than money in the bank. He had a quick ear, a childish love. He had a special gift for loving people, something that was like an ear for music or an eye for color. It was quiet, unobtrusive. It was merely there, and you saw it in his eyes. Willa Cather is one of those writers who gives us a sense of what it means to look into our lives, and the ordinary part of our lives, and to see the greatness. It's about us.

Rosa did it, fifty years ago. Somebody had to. She got on a bus. She took a seat just back of where white people were sitting, was in the right section, but the bus was packed, and a white man got on. She wouldn't get off. She was arrested, and she said, "It wasn't prearranged, it just happened. I was tired, I was tired of being put down, tired of being treated like I didn't matter. Tired of a full day at work." She refused to get up, was arrested. There was a boycott, and then the Civil Rights movement. Because of her, black people in America realized they're special, and

white people in America have to take a second look at how we feel, and how we treat our neighbors. It's about us and how we treat each other.

Something happened fifty years before that, thought. It was 1944, and it wasn't Rosa Parks. It was Jack. Second lieutenant in the army, 761st Tank Battalion. He was black. He sat down in the middle of the bus with his girlfriend, and he was asked to get up when these white people came on, and he said he wasn't going to move, and was told to get up or he'd be sorry. And then the MPs arrived and they asked him some questions, and they took him to the police station. And Jack said, "I'm not moving." And Jack was arrested, and he refused to move. He took his seat. Rosa Parks refused to move. She took her stand. For Rosa Parks it was a bus boycott that ended in the Civil Rights movement. For Jack, the bus event went nowhere, because the charges were dismissed. But Jack did something else. He played baseball for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Jackie Robinson. African-American children and young people, because of Rosa Parks and Jackie Robinson have learned to see the greatness inside them, the hero. And to see the hero inside. God so loved the world, God sent people like Jackie Robinson and Rosa Parks to help us see, all of us, the greatness within. It's people like that. It's about us.

There's a third type of hero, people who help us see beyond, something beyond. In a sense you could say, and I will say, it's about God. To see the God who is not easy to see, but present. There are people who help us remember to look. The church is one of those places where we're in training to look for God, and to help others see beyond, as well as ourselves. To see beyond. The church is one of those places where we are reminded to look at what you can see, so you can see what you would miss if you stopped looking. The church is that kind of place. It's about God. The hero helps us see.

There's a story several years ago about a mother who asked her son what was the highest number he had ever counted to, and the seven-year-old answered, "I once counted to 537." His mother said, "Why did you stop there?" and the boy answered, "Because church was over." Everybody understands that. The church ought to get us to count as high as we can count. To give us examples of people who encourage us to reach as far as we can reach. See it's about God. This past week, 50 members of our church got on a bus, and the bus took us to Cheyenne, Wyoming, and then we got on about a 40-car passenger train pulled by a steam engine, and the train took us to Commerce City. It was arranged by the Senior Council. It was an interesting event. We were in glass-topped cars. The train went to such notable places as Greeley and Nunn and Pierce and Brighton and Fort Lupton. Thursday the train was mostly empty, except for us. But we suspected that one of the cars way back behind ours, we suspected there were some important people on that car, just by the way people were acting, you know? Important people have been on that train in the past. Lyndon Johnson was on it once, Wendell Wilkie when he was running for president, our current governor was on it, in fact made the decision to run for mayor, I think, when he was on that train. There was a dance hall in one of the baggage cars, and once upon a time on that train it featured a nude wedding.

Thursday, however, it was just a church group from First Methodist, and we didn't have any excitement like that. Nobody was married on the train. I mean, there were people who were married, but not on the train. And everybody was completely clothed, and we saw buffalo herds and we saw deer and we saw antelope and we saw people. People on the side of the tracks,

hundreds of people with cameras, hundreds of people cheering us, and they waved at us, and we waved back at them. They thought we were important. We knew who the important people were in the car. Those were the ones back behind us. Oh, it was nostalgia that drove the crowds. They looked at this huge train and made all of us think of something bigger than ourselves, something beyond, we began to think we were important as people, as important as the people in the cars behind us. The people lining the tracks and the crowds that formed in the towns made us realize that there was something beyond all of us that was important. We've got to realize, the real heroes were the Union Pacific employees and volunteers that made that train trip possible, and made us feel important. They were the ones who served us lunch. They were the ones who told us the history of the train, how long the train had been running, how fast it could go. A hundred and twenty miles an hour was how fast it could go. Beyond the photographers taking our pictures. They were the people, the heroic people. God so loved the world that God sent these people to help us look beyond ourselves.

Two weeks ago I saw it, a strange-looking truck. The sign on the truck, bright red letters, "College kids hauling junk" and there was a phone number, trash pickup service, and the words, "Let tomorrow's leaders haul your junk today." If I had a whole lot of junk, I'd sure call them. Because some of the most important people in the world are the ones who haul our junk, who lift us above our troubles, who sift us through our baggage, who pick us up after we see and live our hangups, who modify our software and optimize our hard drives. It was Bill Coffin who said, "When I go to the hospital to see the sick and dying, before I leave, I often go to the maternity ward to look at the new arrivals. It helps remind me that it isn't that death is so bad, but life is so good that I cling to it." It isn't that death is so bad, but that life is so good. The hero is the one who helps us look beyond ourselves, beyond our junk, beyond our fears, our despair, our problems, to the God who so loved us that God sent God's sons and daughters.

J. J. Rowling gave us a hero who flies on a broom, and we pay for a ticket to watch it. God gave us a hero who died on a cross, and we pay attention, and live it, knowing God so loved the world that God sent us heroes like Rosa Parks, so we'd know we can make a difference. One person can make a difference. It's all about them. It's all about us. It's all about God, and it's about time the hero comes along. It's about time.