

November 1, 2020

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Reading: Matthew 23:1-12

The Message: Hero? Saint? Or Sinners All?

Video

We do seem to need heroes, don't we? We like to put people up on pedestals -- sometimes literally as well as figuratively. Honour, nobility, bravery, compassion, and fortitude, a moral example: these are just some of the definitions of the word hero.

But the trouble with heroes is that they don't always stay up on those pedestals. And this year many have fallen or been knocked down.

There can be intense pain in having our heroes knocked down.

But as Alan Edelstein, author of 'Everyone is Sitting on the Curb: How and Why America's Heroes are Disappearing' wrote, it is quite rare for a hero to stay a hero on close examination.

Years ago, my historian husband wrote an article about the great John Wesley, founder of Methodism, and his time in the US. Alan recounted how Wesley became enamored by the daughter of a magistrate he was supposed to be tutoring in the faith, but he didn't think he should marry so was fickle in his intentions. When she decided to marry another, he excommunicated her and was run out of town as a result. That ended his time in America.

That wasn't the first or last time that Alan discovered that being a faithful historian can plop one into the middle of controversy!

Christians have some experience with heroes. Historically we have called them saints.

And this is their day. All Saints' Day is a day when we lift up heroes, saints known and unknown.

How do we sift out saints from sinners?

Some traditions distinguish between saints, who obey God's will, and sinners who disobey.

Others set apart super holy people. Regular Christians like you and I in that tradition, aren't particularly bad, they would say, but we haven't done anything extraordinary enough to be called saints.

But during the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th Century, leaders like Martin Luther began to teach that we are all saints...

... and sinners.

Because one could equally argue that we are all sinners.

Luther defined sin as the self-centered failure to trust God (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article II).

Adam and Eve's problem wasn't just that they ate a piece of fruit or broke one of God's rules.

Their real sin was their desire to be 'like God,' relying on their judgement rather than trusting God's word.

We too get trapped in relying on our own judgment, so, yes, we sin.

Luther himself was sometimes better at demonstrating the sinner than the saint. He was certainly a hero of the reformation. But he insulted opponents, was very very anti-semitic, gave lousy advice to Philip of Hesse -- even though Philip was already married, Luther advised him to marry in secret -- which dramatically damaged Luther's reputation.

Some feel that all of these things should be excused. Others insist that the times were different.

If we want a hero, we gloss over what is distasteful.

But Luther calls Christians simultaneously saints and sinners because he redefines saints as forgiven sinners.

We are called saints, not because we change into something different, but because of God's relationship with us.

Any changes are a result of God's grace. "Saints are sinners, too, but they are forgiven and absolved."

It was at this point in my sermon, that another word popped into my mind. Forgive, absolved and Trump.

In a few days we might know what direction our neighbours to the south will be taking.

I haven't uttered the name of this president in a sermon before. But I have to ask myself, will Trump be forgiven for separating children from their parents?

I decided to google forgiveness and Trump. And I discovered that Trump himself has never asked God for forgiveness.

I guess that answers that!

Being a saint is about who I am in relationship with God.

We don't remember Luther because he was always nice, not because he was always good, and certainly not because he was always right. We remember Luther because he directed attention always away from himself to Christ.

It is to Christ we look for salvation, not our own holiness.

Luther is calling us to be honest with ourselves about our sin so that we more fully understand our need for Christ. "We will commit sins while we are here (on earth) for this life is not a place where justice resides. We however, says Peter (2Peter 3.13) are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where justice will reign.

Luther did not excuse sin. Nor should we ignore Luther's sins or anyone's. But with Luther, we recognize that the sacrifice of Christ is greater than our sin.

God has taken away the sin of the world -- our sin -- through the free gift of grace. We therefore still stand where Luther himself took his stand -- indeed, where all the saints through the long history of the church have always stood: at the foot of the cross.

We so desire saints with a capital S! We yearn to give our allegiance to someone, something. Hero, Saint.

I think this week, I've learned it's time I closed the book on wanting heroes for a while. Whatever good there is to come out of] sad sordid stories about heroes pushed off pedestals, it will be up to the rest of us, to look at ourselves, examine ourselves, and ask if we are putting our trust in God rather than ourselves.

Relying on God, we can all do saintly things, we can all be like those saints we remember today whom we have loved and lost..

May the God who created us all in God's own image bring us closer to God's heart, where all truth is found.