

## A Few Thoughts for the Hunkered-Down

Thursday, June 25, 2020

# *The Hero*

*This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. —1 John 4:10*

Over the recent decades the word *hero* has become popular and is commonly applied to those people who are facing tough battles and giving their all for the good of society. Most recently we see health workers held up as heroes, especially those who are dealing with COVID victims. After 9-11 our first responders, particularly police and firefighters, were loudly hailed as heroes as so many gave their lives to save lives on that horrible day. War veterans and all who have served in the military have generally been called heroes, but not always. Teachers have been praised as heroes over my lifetime. As we look back over the past, we find numerous men and women who have boldly changed the course of history, and again the label hero is often applied.

In these recent days of unrest, the label hero is being significantly reconsidered, and many who were once labeled as heroes are losing that title, most notably the police. Many historical figures once deemed heroes are being demoted as statues are removed and names dropped from buildings and institutions. Washington and Jefferson are being questioned as heroes as they were slave owners. Columbus and Churchill are no longer chic because they built and maintained empires. Locally, we have seen General Sutter fall upon hard times, and his name and statue shall be disappearing as he pioneered the west to the detriment of Native Americans. It seems that every statue is now up for re-evaluation.

In one respect the present hubbub is not new as historical characters have always been up for evaluation. There are many honored heroes whose status I have questioned over the years. By my understanding General George Custer did numerous despicable things in his life and I never understood why he had a following. I had also heard that General Sutter was not a particularly nice person. Though I have never been in the South enough to speak to the matter first hand, it is my understanding that many of the confederate general statues in southern cities are larger and more prominently placed than appropriate for such a tainted cause. Historical heroes and their statues will always be surrounded by at least some controversy. What is different about our present time is that there now seems to be a sudden rush to remove numerous historical figures, and by the time the criteria of slave ownership, empire building, racial attitudes, treatment of women, and other bad deeds are applied, it looks as though *none* of these monuments will be left standing.

In the tumult of the 1960s, as the media was no longer hiding the bad habits of the nation's leaders and celebrities, there arose a popular outcry that all the heroes had gone. "Where have you gone Joe DiMaggio?" was the lament of Simon and Garfunkel, and this was believed by many at the time to be a profound insight. Under a close scrutiny it seems that no hero can stand. I wonder if in a few years the only statues left standing will be of Florence Nightingale and Mr. Rogers, with a small contingency calling for their removal too!

There is another side to this debate, and I hope that it is heard before all the statues are gone. Heroes and great people of history are not necessarily nice people, and in fact, many of them were rather unlikeable, but they did change the course of history and made the world we now live in what it is. Some of them demonstrated amazing acts of virtue and goodness, even though other parts of their lives were troubled and dark. A real-life hero is a real person, with all the virtue and sin which that entails. When we look for sinless heroes, we find ourselves on an elusive hunt.

In our contemporary debate over heroes, I encourage all to take another look at their Bibles. It can be asserted without any exaggeration that to stroll through the pages of God's redemption—history is to walk through a rogues' gallery. The crimes and injustices committed by the Bible's prominent people seem beyond number. Jacob was a schemer and his many sons, the fathers of the tribes of Israel, were thugs. Moses was a murderer. David's sins are numerous and well cataloged. We call them heroes of faith, not that they were all people of superior virtue, but because by God's grace and Spirit they advanced the saving plan of God. One of the reasons that I so love many of these heroes is that they are people so much like me—sinners saved only by grace.

A seminary professor of mine used to repeatedly remark, "There is only one hero in the Bible, and that is God." Amen. And the wonderful Good News is that this Hero condescends to work in the likes of you and me, and even do great things among us by the power of the Holy Spirit! We should not be surprised that so many statues are falling as sins are being counted. As the statues fall, whatever our feeling may be about whatever monument, let us rejoice that we know the One True Hero, and because of Him, heroism lives on.

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*Blessed be he who in his love stooped to redeem mankind! Blessed be the King who made himself poor to enrich the needy! Blessed be he who came to fulfil the types and emblems of the prophets! Blessed be he who made creation rejoice with the wealth and treasure of his Father! Blessed be he whose glory the dumb sang with hosannas! Blessed be he to whom little children sang new glory in hymns of praise! Blessed be the new King who came that new-born babes might glorify him! Blessed be he unto whom children brought faltering songs to praise him among his disciples!*

—Ephraem the Syrian, 306-73