

Saints and Heroes*

I Peter 2:9-10

All Saints Sunday

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, (Nov. 4) 2018

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At the beginning of the 1998 Coen Brothers movie, *The Big Lebowski* the narrator's speaks while we watch the Dude, played by Jeff Bridges, walk down the aisle in a grocery store dressed in sandals, pajamas, and bathrobe to buy a carton of half and half, and then write a check at the checkout for 69 cents. The narrator, played by Sam Elliot, says, *Sometimes there's a man... I won't say a hero, 'cause, what's a hero? But sometimes, there's a man. And I'm talkin' about the Dude here. Sometimes, there's a man, well, he's the man for his time and place. He fits right in there.*

So, to repeat the question of the Sam Elliot character, "What's a hero?" Aristotle sought to give us an answer 300 years before Christ because he wanted to highlight the role of heroes in society to inspire people to become heroic. He wanted people to do the work and practice the habits so they would be able to intervene at the decisive moment to change the course of battle or debate or long struggle. Without them all might be lost.

For Aristotle, heroes are the center of the story. They stand out from the crowd. They are self-sufficient and tend to be unique. They are resilient amid setbacks. And Aristotle said the definitive icon of the hero is the soldier who risks death in the midst of battle for the sake of a higher good. He said the noblest death

is death in battle, for battle offers the greatest danger, thus requiring the greatest courage.

Some 1500 years later Thomas Aquinas came along and reinterpreted Aristotle for the late medieval church and society. Aquinas did not seek to inspire his readers to be heroes. Instead, Aquinas asked the question, “What’s a saint?” He sought to inspire Christians to be saints. He wanted Christians to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

The word “hero” does not appear in the New Testament. On the other hand, the word “saint” occurs sixty-four times.

Aquinas highlighted the differences between heroes and saints. For example, there is a difference in the kind of stories told about saints and heroes. The hero makes the decisive intervention at the moment when things are looking bad. But in contrast, for those of us in the church, the story is not about heroes. The story is always about God. Saints might be almost invisible, easily overlooked, on the periphery of the story. What we learn is that the normal, everyday Christian who prays to God, who serves God by serving others, who cooks potlucks, who shows up and helps, gives sacrificially, and loves unreservedly are the saints.

Second, the story is told about heroes to celebrate the virtues of the hero. Strength, courage, wisdom, or great timing are among the qualities on which the hero’s decisive intervention rests. On the other hand, saints might not have any great qualities. The most important quality for a saint is faithfulness to Christ. Hero’s stories are told to celebrate valor. The story of the saint is told to celebrate faith.

Third, as I mentioned, Aristotle celebrates the soldier in battle as the definition of the hero. But the icon of the saint is the martyr. Martyrs are prepared to die in faithfulness to Christ. Saints are prepared to fail and to lose. But in their losing, they highlight the wonder of God's work, God's victory, and how God works in and through common followers of Jesus who often fail, often sin, who hobble along, but who always point to Christ. That's why the word "martyr" means, "witness." Martyrs and saints always point to Christ. We are not in charge; do not have to make everything turn out right. We simply are to be witnesses.

Finally, the hero always stands alone against the world. The hero stands out from the community because of his or her strength or courage or showing up at the big moment to make things turn out right. But the saint never stands alone. Of the sixty-four references to saints in the New Testament, every one is in the plural – "saints." Saints assume, demand, require community – a special kind of community – what we call "communion of the saints" or what we call "church," (communion of the saints is the church across time). Heroes have learned to depend on themselves; saints learn to depend on God and on God's community, the church. Without the church there are no saints.

And when we look for heroes in God's story, we look for the communion of saints. It is the church that is called by God to intervene and by God's grace the church becomes heroic. Saints encourage the church to be faithful to Christ. Saints practice wisdom and patience like Christ, for the sake of the church, so the church will be faithful.

This morning we celebrate and remember the saints of the faith. In our own midst we remember those saints who have gone before us. Who called us and helped us better be the church. They were not necessarily heroic, although sometimes they might have been. But they were faithful.

These last few months we have buried Ray Robberson, Jack Decker, and Betsy Smith. And Jane and I have just returned from burying her father, the Rev. Dr. Ken Webb, who served Christ's church for fifty years as a pastor. All of these are saints of the faith who have helped us better be true and faithful to Christ. They're our saints. They are the saints of God.

At the beginning of the movie *The Big Lebowski*, the narrator says, "Sometimes, there's a man, well, he's the man for his time and place." On this All Saints Sunday, we might say, "Sometimes, there's a community of faith, well, they're the church for their time and place."

Austin Heights, we are called to be the community of faith in this time and place. A place and time of fear and bigotry, with anti-Semitism and racism rampant, a place and time where there is fragmentation, division, and despair. This morning we give thanks to God for those saints who have gone before us. And we pray to God for all of you saints who help us be a community of courage, of faith, of hope, and of love. You help us be the church for this time and place.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.

*Thanks to Sam Wells and his book, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*, p. 42-44, for his help on saints and heroes.