

Life Lessons: Choose Your Heroes Wisely

Jim Ward, July 12, 2009

We're a celebrity-obsessed society. I don't know if you've noticed that.

On Wednesday among the top searches on Yahoo were Emma Watson (I guess she stars in the Harry Potter films), Janet Jackson, and Saturday Night Live comedian/entertainer and now apparently Senator Al Franken.

The first real celebrity obsessed event that I recall is when Elvis Presley died (or did he??). Thousands of people thronging Graceland, candlelight vigils, people with no connection to Elvis other than through his music wracked with genuine grief and mourning.

I think western culture's obsession with celebrity, fame and fortune was really driven home to me on the death of Princess Diana. The sight of thousands of people weeping, literally millions of dollars in flowers rotting in the streets of London, and New York, as people tried to come to grips with her death, and maybe more importantly, somehow become a part of her life by participating in her death.

And the capping event for me, pointing out how far we had drifted into obsession with celebrity was another death that happened at the same time that was barely acknowledged. Does anyone remember who died 5 days after Princess Diana?

If you don't remember Mother Teresa's death, you're not alone. In the midst of mourning Diana, and watching with anticipation what the Royal Family's reaction and behavior might be, talk about who might be the biggest musical "guest" at the funeral, Mother Teresa's death went almost unnoticed by the major media. Now I'm not denegrating Princess Diana's life and legacy, particularly the humanitarian causes she became involved with later in life, but I wonder which of the two had the most positive lasting legacy on humanity?

Well, we humans have long seemed to need some one or some thing to look up to. Placing our faith in people who aren't worthy of our faith is a hallmark

of human history. And God of course knows our human nature. That's why the first and second commandments admonish us to not have any other gods before God and to not make idols. Let's listen to this morning's scripture reading:

The story of the golden calf might be familiar to you from the 10 Commandments movie starring Charlton Heston, maybe from a picture book from Sunday School or a children's Bible. None of these sources probably give a very accurate reflection of what might have happened. They all show huge golden calves, like this on the screen from the movie. In reality, the idol, the god created by the people during Moses' brief absence was probably much smaller, and crudely made.

We need to understand some background I think with what was going on.

The Israelites probably weren't making a new god scholars tell us, but trying to craft a physical representation of God. They longed for something physical to touch, worship, IDOLIZE if you will.

Kind of ironic if you think about it since these were people who had seen God intervene so directly to lead them to freedom from their Egyptian exile. God led them by night through the desert by a pillar of fire, and fed them each day with manna. They certainly had a more physical manifestation of God than we typically get day by day.

Yet they were longing, desperate for some physical representation of God to worship, to idolize.

Now Moses was up on the mountain receiving the 10 commandments when this new golden calf debuted, the 10 commandments where either the top 2 or 3 (depending on your denomination/numbering system) commandments relate to this very issue. So they weren't breaking a specific commandment yet – but they knew it was wrong. These were people of Abrahamic covenant – they knew how God felt about idols.

The purpose of the 10 commandments is to order a just society – to lay the groundwork for a good world, to civilize humanity. Now the later 600+ laws

and rules the Jews received were designed to mold them into a nation to serve a specific purpose.

But these 10 commandments were for everyone. That's why they're posted on walls and in parks, etc.

I wonder if we had a contest with the people who want them to stay and the people who want them removed, which group would know the most commandments? HMMMM.

As New Testament people, we have it easy. In Matthew 22 Jesus is asked which was the most important commandment.

Jesus summarized the commandments for us here, he makes it easy for us: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'^[b] 38This is the first and greatest commandment. 39And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'^[c] 40All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

The purpose of commanding that there be no other gods, no idols, is to make clear that we are first and foremost people of God, not people who are GOD, or even people who are god-like. When we make our heroes gods, when we treat them like idols, we're not only disobeying God's commandments, we're setting ourselves up for a fall. True heroes seem to have a genuine sense of modesty, a belief that they are called to and responsible to a higher purpose than their own fame and glory.

One of my favorite movies is Chariots of Fire, which focuses on two members of Britain's 1924 Olympic Track Team. Eric Liddle is from a devout Scottish Presbyterian from a family that doesn't really approve of him running, especially as it relates to him being in the spotlight as a runner (instead of a preacher), and horror of horrors, wearing short pants! But Eric's priorities are tested when the 200 meter event is scheduled to happen on a Sunday, and as a devout and pious old-school Presbyterian, he absolutely will not run on Sunday. The core of the movie is his interaction with, and ultimate problem solving with Harold Abrahams, a Jewish member of the team whose event is scheduled for Saturday, his Sabbath. The two show us

how true heroes understand priorities, understand that their very talents and successes are gifts of a loving God.

I love Eric's response to his family's criticism of his running, which explains both his desire to run, and how that gift can be used to glorify his Creator:

"I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure."

A true hero is humble.

Moses is definitely presented in the Bible as an heroic figure – he confronted Pharaoh, led people out of Egypt, etc. But he had many faults, faults that later the Bible tells us kept him from accompanying his people into the promised land.

But while Moses was a hero, the Bible makes clear he was not a god, not an idol. And even in their flagrant breaking of God's commands, the Israelites knew the difference between heroes and gods, between men and idols. I wonder if we do?

I think in our rush to have leaders, in our desperation to have someone to look up to, we sometimes create idols out of athletes and entertainers and politicians. At some level I appreciate it when Charles Barkley and other athletes and entertainers say they aren't and don't want to be role models. Much of their behavior seems to fall far short of hero or role model status.

But I think in their hearts they often thrive on being idolized. And our culture is so ready to award idol status. We crave identifying with the latest and greatest singer or athlete or politician. We mourn when they die, and we rally for or against them when they fall. And we simply forget them when they've had their fame, when their glory is spent.

We're no different in the church. We have our Jimmy Swaggerts, our Jim Bakers, and most recently in our neck of the woods Colorado Springs pastor Ted Haggard.

The United Methodist Church, because of its Itinerancy system of appointing pastors to churches, and moving them as the bishop and cabinet feels is best, does much to avoid the pitfalls of having a church built around a superstar pastor.

July is the usual transition month for ministers in the United Methodist Church. But I know in narthexes and Pastor's Studies all across America last Sunday and this past week, the words Pastor John or Reverend Laurie used to do this, or Reverend Smith never did it that way.

You see, even in the church we have this intrinsic desire to look up to someone, to seek for leadership, to find role models. But that natural inclination decays so quickly into idolizing people. And that brings me to the second passage that Gary read for us.

The letter to the Hebrews is an interesting book. Some thought the letter was written by the Apostle Paul, although most now agree that's probably not the case.

No matter who wrote it, it is an exhortation, a list of instructions and recommendations, to the Jewish followers of Jesus, who were scattered and living in exile.

The heart of much of the book flows from this short passage:

2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God

The author is reminding those early followers of Jesus that they already have a role model, they have one whom they follow and seek to be like. They have Jesus, whom the writer then calls the author and perfecter of our faith.

And that's the kind of role model that can inspire people to lay down their lives for their brothers and sisters, that's our savior who can inspire Mother Terese to live a life consumed by passion for the poor and destitute. We're called to something different as the church – we're called to something different as followers of Jesus.

Finally, while we can't and shouldn't enforce on society our priorities, we can be a model.

We can and frankly I think God wants us to enjoy the work of musicians and dancers and artists and athletes, God wants us to look for and support competent and thoughtful political leaders.

But as Christians we're called to remember who we are and whose we are. Just like those desert wanderers of thousands of years ago we're charged with not creating idols, we're charged with remembering the author and perfecter of our faith, Jesus Christ.

I guess it might sound like I'm anti-hero. I'm not. I think any society benefits from having people to look up to; good people, heroic people. When I think of heroes I think of the film of Lou Gherig standing up before the crowd in Yankee Stadium and telling those people he was the luckiest man in the world, even though he knew he was facing years of struggle and ultimate death with the disease that is associated with his name. I think of Martin Luther King Jr. facing attacking dogs and water cannons as he led oppressed people across the bridge to fight for the rights that were theirs, Constitutional and God-given rights, and he changed our world. I think of Mother Terese who chose a path in life different than the one her family and peers knew she could have taken, but again a path that changed the world and helped so many, the poor and powerless as well as the rich and powerful, see God.

I think societies need role models – we need our heroes.

I'll bet you'll never guess what recent event spurred the idea for this sermon. Once again we saw the death of an American idol – **and** I'm using that word very deliberately. It became obvious this week just how much Michael Jackson was a product of his life, and a man manipulated and used by those around him, including his own parents and family. And while I will never take the title of LUMC's #1 Pop Music fan, I could truly appreciate his musical and entertainment abilities – the music and dancing around Thriller were truly amazing and showed him at his peak.

But I think the death of Michael Jackson laid open what I worry about in our society and our unthinking identification with and adoration of those who entertain us. We come close, and maybe even pass those wandering after the escape from Egypt in creating our own golden calves, in manufacturing our own idols, in a vain attempt to fill a void. Too often, we worship and idolize famous people simply because they're famous. Do I have to mention Paris Hilton?

My hope and prayer is that we begin to focus on things that matter, that we can again begin to choose our heroes wisely, both as a society and as individuals. Because there are so many worth looking up to, so many worthy of truly being role models, so many true heroes. People who devote their energy, their talents, their lives, to making this world a truly better place. In that sense, we're all called to be heroes – to be role models, and we can be. When we use our talents, our gifts, our time, to benefit our world, to glorify God, we too are true heroes.

I hope you'll take just a few moments sometime and ask yourself;

Who are my heroes?
And did I choose them wisely?

Let's pray: