

“We All Have Great Ones to Whom We Look Up”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
for Transfiguration Sunday, February 26, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Psalm 99 (VU #819)

Matthew 17:1-9

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

If we look at our past, I am sure we all can come up with one or two, maybe three or four or five people who have made a major impact on our lives. It may have been an older sibling, a close friend, a teacher or mentor, maybe a boss or co-worker when starting in the workforce. Most of us have an individual or a few individuals that we look up to.

As you are pondering who those people have been, and maybe still continue to be, in your life, let me remind you that Jesus and his disciples had those kind of people as well.

Neil Armstrong may have uttered these words, but it was not Neil Armstrong who first had this insight: “We stood on the shoulders of giants to reach the moon.”

Every profession, every activity, every pursuit has had giants of inspiration, knowledge, and technical wizardry who have come before them, and who have allowed them, as well as us, to achieve what we have achieved.

Today's gospel lesson is a celebration of that tradition. As the disciples come to a fuller awareness of the importance of Jesus' life, they see in him the qualities recorded in the biblical witness of their day that somewhat parallels Elijah and Moses. From our perspective we may think: “Wasn't that obvious?” or “Why are they undervaluing Jesus?” but for the disciples at that time in their journey, it was an awareness that they were in the midst of spiritual and religious greatness.

It is not always easy to assess someone we know as great, or even see the universal impact an individual may eventually have coming from a context familiar to ourselves. Is the person special, or just ordinary? Is the individual unique, or maybe sharing an experience(s) others (maybe even most) have known?

Yet despite the limitations as to how we are able to judge those with whom we have interacted on a daily basis, we usually know unique and special people when we experience them in our everyday lives.

And it is not just people that can impact our lives.

The summer after grade ten I was on a French exchange with a student from Sherbrook, Quebec. When I went there, I got to attend Expo '67, and experience Montreal for the first time. I fell in love with the jazzy, brass-filled sound of Quebec pop music of the day, seemingly influence by bands such as Chicago even before they were known in Canada. While in Sarnia, we took Alain to Niagara Falls. I shall never forget (it is 50 years ago now and I remember it as the day it happened) how over the top excited he was to stand on the observation deck of the Skylon Tower and see the falls and surrounding territories.

Nothing could match that event for excitement and joy. As one who had visited the Falls half a dozen times or more by that time in life, I had a new appreciation for the initial “Aha” moment of something grandiose and majestic.

There was no rushing water around the disciples, but there could have been, for they were taken aback in excitement and hope for the future.

Psychology Today printed an article three years ago as to the five ways that heroes can improve our lives. It is a fascinating study on this very topic written by Scott Allison, a Professor of Psychology at the University of Richmond.

1. Heroes Produce a Recently Identified Emotion called “Elevation”

To begin, the article says that heroes provide for us a recently identified emotion called “elevation.” Now in truth, it is not all that recently identified. Thomas Jefferson used the term “moral elevation” to speak of the euphoric feeling one gets from reading great literature.

When people experience elevation, they experience a mix of awe, reverence, and admiration for a morally beautiful act.

Sounds like the reading for today, does it not? And could “elevation” be a non-religious term for “transfiguration,” a moment when life is transformed and changed before us?”

2. Heroes Heal Our Psychic Wounds

Hero stories calm people’s fears, buoy their spirits, nourish their hopes, and foster important values of strength and resilience. Life now has greater purpose and meaning once we hear and experience the story of an important hero.

3. Heroes Nourish our Connections with Other People

Social norms in early times were created in the telling of stories – stories often shared around the campfire at night. In those times people connected through the tales shared, and simply being together in a circle.

The content of hero stories that sometimes arose from those settings also had a large reason for the connection with others. They affirm the community’s most cherished values, and validate the accepted world view. Heroes are role models who perform behaviours that reinforce our most treasured values and connections with others.

4. Heroes Show Us How to Transform Our Lives

Joseph Campbell, a modern day expert on the role of mythology in various cultures, has suggested that most heroes undergo a personal transformation during their hero journeys.

Some heroes may be shy and withdrawn, lacking confidence, and they need to overcome those limitations; others may be too cocky and self-obsessed, and need to become more aware of their surroundings and the people within it.

True heroes make that transformation successfully, and their story helps others to see the possibility of transformation within their own lives. Campbell suggests we all have the opportunity to go through a heroic-like transformation. “Only when we risk change and growth in our lives will we reach our full potential.”

5. Heroes Turn Us into Heroes Ourselves

Good heroes use the power of transformation not just to change themselves for the better, but also to transform the world. In almost every hero story the hero eventually transforms society in significant and positive ways. And in witnessing that action, we in turn see the potential of doing heroic acts ourselves, to respond to the presence of “elevation” displayed by the hero.

Now there you have it – a modern psychological explanation for the power of having a hero in your life, and to hear significant hero journeys and stories as part of your experience.

But in truth, the most effective hero story is one in the gospels, where we hear the journey of Jesus and His disciples, seeking ways to be better people and to help transform a society that needed encouragement and guidance.

I hope you do have a hero in your life – someone special to you, or who was special and formative in your growing up years. They remain special no matter how old we get.

Next week one of my mentors, if not heroes, turns 100, and he had a major influence on my life as to why I decided to become a minister 5 years after I met him in 1959. We may not be fortunate enough to have those important people who influenced us in our childhood with us into retirement, but we can be open to the heroes of a new generation who see the future with bright eyes opened, and hearts eager to serve.

In their presence we, like the disciples, can be transformed and eager for the future. We can share true moments of “spiritual elevation,” and be thankful.