

Where Have All the Heroes Gone?

Hebrews 12:1-2

January 10, 2009

SLIDE ONE: WHERE HAVE ALL THE HEROES GONE?

I admit it. It was naive of me to be disappointed by the revelations about Tiger Woods. After all, sports heroes and entertainers and politicians and all sorts of others in public life invariably disappoint.

SLIDE TWO: TIGER WOODS FAMILY

But somehow Tiger seemed different. His bond with his father, his mental toughness, his other-worldly golf prowess, his “appeal” to all races made him unique.

So when I received the news I was—and still am--disappointed.

Tiger would have done well to have read and digested Proverbs 22:1: “A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favor rather than silver and gold.” Or to have heeded the observations of the great Jack Nicklaus: “It takes hundreds of good shots to gain confidence, and one bad one to lose it.”

We all need heroes, people who are larger than life who inspire us to reach beyond our grasp. And when our heroes fall, we ourselves feel personally diminished.

SLIDE THREE: MICKEY MANTLE

When I was a boy my hero was Mickey Mantle, the center fielder for the New York Yankees. I actually loved the Yankees in those days, but let me offer you this disclaimer. That was the time before George Steinbrenner bought them and they became the evil empire.

I followed Mickey Mantle every day, read everything I could get my hands on. I would toss my baseball high in the air, and circle under it, pretending I was the immortal Mick.

When I was eleven, the year Mantle won the Triple Crown, I faced my first disappointment with my hero. I learned that the Mick would go in the runway between the dugout and the clubhouse between innings and sneak a smoke.

And then when I got older I sadly discovered that the Mick was quite the cad. He abused alcohol; he was a womanizer. He didn't take care of his body, thus leading to career-shortening injuries.

SLIDE FOUR: MANTLE ON COVER OF SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

Mantle spoke with great remorse of his drinking in a Sports Illustrated article, "My Life in a Bottle". He received a liver transplant at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas, on June 8, 1995, after his liver had been damaged by years of chronic alcoholism, cirrhosis, and hepatitis C.

Mickey Mantle died on August 13, 1995, at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas. He was 63 years old.

SLIDE FIVE: WHERE HAVE ALL THE HEROES GONE

Young people, in particular, need someone to look up to. In a recent survey of high school students, the most popular response to the question, "Who is your hero?" was "No one."

A Jr. High teacher asked her students to write an essay called "Who Is My Hero." A seventh grade girl showed her essay to her father. He was delighted that she had chosen him as her hero. "Why did you pick me?" he asked.

"Because I couldn't spell DeCaprio."

World Almanac polled 2,000 eighth graders to learn which people they most admired and wanted to be like. The students pointed mainly to movie stars and rock artists. Although half those polled were girls, only five women were on the list—all actresses, models of pop singers. There wasn't a single name on the list who **WAS NOT**, not an entertainer or a sports figure. Not a states person, or scientist. Not an author, or serious musician. Not an architect, astronaut, or even a

physician.

The late Sydney Harris commenting on these polls said, “Societies need role models more than anything else. They need people they can look up to and emulate. A nation that does not reward and respect real accomplishments...is weakening its own moral fiber and preparing for its own collapse.”

SLIDE 6: MANDELA AND TUTU

My two greatest heroes have been Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela. I have had the privilege of meeting Desmond several times and had several meals with him. He is the real deal, a congruent person whose public accolades match his private persona. Why do we need people like Desmond Tutu? We need heroes because all of us need flesh and blood models to build our lives upon. We need their moral values to restrain our own worst impulses. But more positively, we need them so that we can internalize their vision of life. Their values, their goals, their wisdom becomes part of our bloodstream as we study their lives and emulate them.

SLIDE SEVEN: JESUS

Of course, as Christians, there is one hero whom we look to and idealize above all others, who represents a vision of what we all aspire to be and long to become. I speak of Jesus of Nazareth.

This past Wednesday I was in a long security line at Schipol Airport (Amsterdam). Barbara and I had been talking to a woman who was in line just behind us. She had been through some tough times. Her brother and father had died recently. Her husband had left her. She was very fragile. She asked what I did. I told her. She said, “What do you believe?”

It was one of those moments when a thousand thoughts go racing through your mind instantaneously. At first, I wanted to dodge the

question by saying, “We don’t have enough time for me to tell you all I believe.” But then I remembered that scripture verse, I can’t cite its location, that goes, “Always be ready to give an account of the hope that is in you.” So I said something like this to her:

“I believe that following Jesus of Nazareth is the most important thing I can do. I try to be like him. Life is short, I told her, and I want to spend my brief years on earth following after the highest and best I know. So far in my life, Jesus is that highest and best that I have ever seen.”

She nodded. Whether it sank in, I don’t know.

I wonder if Jesus is any sense a hero to those of us living in the opening chapter of the 21st century? We in the church have tried to cage him in musty old buildings or imprison him within the pages of an sacred book, and failed to make his way compelling to people around us, people who have never thought deeply about the possibility of following him.

The only way others will follow him is if they see us following him, see us grounded in our admiration of him, see us trying to come as close as we possibly can to his mind and spirit.

For many people Jesus is a distant and remote supernatural figure. They see carvings of him and pictures of him, but he has no more relevance to their lives than the stone carvings on Mt. Rushmore.

Think with me what Jesus was like. Think of his way of dealing with the stresses of life, his way of dealing with impossible people, his way of dealing with the hurts that were dealt to him so unfairly—**THAT’S A WAY** that makes sense for everyone. Jesus faced each day with joy; he faced the future with hope. He trusted in God utterly and trusted everyone about him. His way, his life is what everyone deeply wants for their own life. In an age so devoid of heroes, particularly for the young, Jesus is the hero who invites us to imagine us becoming like him.

SLIDE 8: BLANK

One last word on Mickey Mantle. As he was in the last months of his life, his former team-mate, Bobby Richardson, led him to Christ. He also gave one final television interview.

The reporter called him a role model.

“Role model?” Mantle asked. I'm not a role model. I wouldn't want anyone to have a life like the life I've lived.”

Mantle came to Christ late, but nevertheless he came. And here let me just speak personally. It is an inspiring story for me that the man who was my boyhood hero came to love and serve the One who has been my Ultimate Hero, my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

If you are looking for someone to follow, if you have never made a decision to follow Jesus Christ and give all of yourself that you can to all of Jesus Christ that you know, I hope you will do that today. And if you are making that decision, I'd like to know about it.

SLIDE 9: EMAIL: TSWICEGOOD@TVPCHURCH.ORG

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