

Unlikely Heroes

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Samuel was the first of the prophets of Israel. He heard the voice of God and shared God's word with the people. As an old man, it was Samuel who anointed Saul as the first king of Israel. Later, after Saul's failure, he anointed David who was the greatest of Israel's kings.

Samuel's birth was both interesting and, in some ways, miraculous. His mother Hannah desperately wanted to have children, but without success. She prayed at the temple – not the famous Temple of Solomon that, of course, had not then been built -- for God to give her a child. The priest Eli learned of her distress and told her not to worry, that she would have a child. When Hannah conceived Samuel, she dedicated him to God. She took the young child Samuel to be apprentice to the priest Eli who served in the temple.

One night, as Samuel was going to sleep, he had what he thought was a dream. He heard someone call his name, "Samuel!" The boy thought it was the old priest Eli calling him, so he went to see. It turned that Eli had not called him. Thinking it was just a dream, Samuel settled back down to sleep. The same thing happened again with the same response. Finally, the third time, Eli caught on and told the boy, "When you hear the voice this time say, "Speak God, I'm your servant ready to listen."

The next morning, Eli instructed the boy to report the full truth of he had heard. Samuel revealed to him God's judgment on Eli and his evil sons. The old priest accepted the judgment. Samuel's life itself is evidence of the work of Eli. Through the old, beleaguered priest, young Samuel received and embraced the call of God.

My father was a minister and, like most preachers, he had, what was for me, a signature sermon. His was based on the early Christian "father" Barnabas who was like Eli in many ways to a young Christian convert named Saul of Tarsus. His name was Joseph and he was surnamed Barnabas – meaning *son of encouragement* according to his story found in the early part of Acts. Barnabas' first appears at the end of chapter four – that he sold a field he owned and gave the money to the apostles. He became a very influential leader to the followers of the way of Jesus.

He befriended and defended Saul of Tarsus who later became Paul. Finally, Barnabas went with Paul on that apostle's first missionary journey. It was Barnabas who really made Paul's later ministry possible, a ministry that is still influencing us today. I asked my father to preach his *Barnabas* sermon at my ordination service. He did because Barnabas was the kind of pastor and the kind of person I wanted to be.

Eli and Barnabas were, in many ways, unlikely heroes in our faith tradition. Their example still touches us each of us. We have people like Barnabas and Eli in our lives. They are often unlikely heroes, yet ones who make a difference for us. This may be someone we live with daily, who lives life with a courage that challenges and inspires us.

Christian composer Ken Medema honored such a hero in one of his songs (*Start Something*).

My mother led no movement
had no famous words to say,
She simply raised her children
to give their lives away.

Helen Keller was born blind, deaf, and dumb, yet she wrote: ““I thank God for my handicaps; for through them I have found myself, my work, and my God.” The 5. 19th-century spiritual director Abbé Huvelin guided countless people on meaningful journeys of faith. Yet this was a man whose journal later revealed that he suffered chronic and deep depression. His willingness to put his less-than-whole self at the disposal of God’s Spirit (Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement*) made him an unlikely hero who may still encourage many today who suffer from depression – that they can still make a difference. Some of our heroes might just be waiting out there in the most surprising places to meet and inspire us.

I wrote in my *e-notes* article this week that we are anticipating the inauguration of our nation’s first African-American president. We are also remembering Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Forty years after his death, we now celebrate King’s birthday as a national holiday. We remember King as the driving force behind the Civil Rights movement of the early 1960’s. We do not always remember that, in the last few years of his life, King became identified with opposition to the Vietnam war and with efforts to end poverty and support poor people in the United States and around the world. This stance created significant tension with many of those who had supported his efforts for racial equality.

King was assassinated in Memphis, TN in 1968 where he had gone to support garbage collectors' who were on strike. By the end of his life, Martin Luther King, Jr. was an unlikely hero even for many in the African-American community. Many Americans refused to support the King holiday primarily because of his anti-war stance. He is a hero today to those who work for civil, racial, and economic equity for all people -- and to those who oppose military diplomacy by our government and who desire a lasting peace.

Heroes such as Martin Luther King, Jr. can become almost super human in our memory of them. Like Jesus, there is a tendency to worship them without the obligation to follow their footsteps. Heroes like King, and the more unlikely heroes of our lives, provide the foundation on which we take important stands in our lives. They provide the shoulders that lift us up to see farther and act more heroically.

Who are the heroes in your life? Who are the ones who help you gain a fresh perspective and who remind you what is most important in life? First, give thanks for them, especially this week. Then, be a hero to someone else by your example, your passion, and your love.

Each of us is probably a Barnabas or Eli, or even a Martin Luther King, Jr., to someone else. We have said many times that each of us is Jesus to others. Even in our weakness,

we make a difference in their lives through our presence. Even with, and maybe because of our disabilities, we encourage and enable people to receive and embrace their capacity to respond to the call of God.

Let us “listen to the language of [our own] wounds.” (Jim Cotter, *Prayer at Night*). Do you have to cope with

- anything
- you think of a
- problem?
- disability?
- handicap?
- (pause)
- 6. occasions when
 - you’ve recognized
 - these
 - (in a way)
 - as gift?
 - (sharing?)

E.

Eliz. O’Connor

1. “the larger sorrows
 - do not
 - so readily
 - go away,
 - and may be
 - intricately related
 - to the work
 - we are to do.”
2. in fact,
 - that work
 - may become
 - the way we
 - work through
 - sorrow
 - conflict
 - become not only
 - “healed, but
 - [also] healer” (*Cry Pain, Cry Hope*)
3. my life
 - through experience
 - my mother’s death
 - car accident
 - 26 years ago
 - my own sadness
 - loss
 - grief

- realized
 - capacity sympathize
 - sorrows
 - loss
 - confusion
 - others
4. challenge
- each of us
 - “stand still
 - with [our] wounds
 - and [our] damage...
 - and all the
 - baggage of
 - [our lives]
 - flawed as
 - we are
 - we stand on
 - holy ground.
 - ...this is the
 - blessed space
 - [hollowed] out
 - for us,
 - the place where
 - [God’s] word
 - is spoken
 - and heard...
 - God meets
 - [us] here,
 - and nowhere else.”
5. just about
- 10 years ago
 - vibrant church community
 - experienced
 - devastating split
 - group
 - people
 - experiencing exile
 - decided form
 - new congregation
6. out of that
- sense of
 - anger
 - grief
 - confusion

- loss
 - Crossroads Church
 - formed
7. congregation
- gifts
 - openness to all
 - sensitivity to
 - those who have
 - experience
 - hurt
 - rejection
 - conjunction with
 - church
8. gifts
- healing
 - through acceptance
 - each one's
 - questions
 - each one's
 - perspective
 - each one's
 - orientation
 - each one's journey
9. this congregation
- soon to
 - celebrate
 - 10th anniversary
 - vision
 - invite
 - church writ large
 - even world
 - beyond church
 - into healing
 - place
10. take circle
- drawn to
 - keep us
 - and others
 - out
 - draw it
 - larger
 - to take
 - all people
 - in

11. vision
 - we see
 - journey we
 - walk
12. invitation
 - to you
 - share your
 - journey
 - with us
 - join us
 - walk together
 - work together
 - in Spirit
 - standing firmly
 - in tradition
 - shoulders
 - unlikely
 - heroes
 - casting vision
 - transform world
 - in Jesus' name