

A Little Holiness Acts 4;5-12; I John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18; Psalm 23 5-7-06

Every now and then there is a lot of discussion about just who is considered a hero and who is not. Recently, I received an email, that I have seen before, from one of my daughters. I am certain many of you have also received this same email, they often seem to make the rounds over and over again. It was one of those timely messages that I found I could use in this brief meditation. It was called "Ben Stein's Last Column." Ben Stein has been around for a long time and is possibly known best as the terribly boring teacher in *Ferris Buehler's Day Off*.

In this column he wonders why it is we equate money with the value of a human being and points to the outrageous salaries movie stars make for often meaningless work. We might add some CEOs to the list of tremendously overpaid folks. This email ends with the mention of those who have shown their lives to be of great value by the surrender of them in service to others.

This is part of what he wrote:

A real star is the U.S. soldier who was sent to disarm a bomb next to a road north of Baghdad. He approached it, and the bomb went off and killed him.

A real star, the kind who haunts my memory night and day, is the U.S. soldier in Baghdad who saw a little girl playing with a piece of unexploded ordnance on a street near where he was guarding a station. He pushed her aside and threw himself on it just as it exploded. He left a family desolate in California and a little girl alive in Baghdad.

There are plenty of other stars in the American firmament...the policemen and women who go off on patrol in South Central and have no idea if they will return alive; the orderlies and paramedics who bring in people who have been in terrible accidents and prepare them for surgery; the teachers and nurses who throw their whole spirits into caring for autistic children; the kind men and women who work in hospices and in cancer wards.

Think of each and every fireman who was running up the stairs at the World Trade Center as the towers began to collapse. Now you have my idea of a real hero.

I came to realize that life lived to help others is the only one that matters. This is my highest and best use as a human. I can put it another way. Years ago, I realized I could never be as great an actor as Olivier or as good a comic as Steve Martin...or Martin Mull or Fred Willard--or as good an economist as Samuelson or Friedman or as good a writer as Fitzgerald. Or even remotely close to any of them.

But I could be a devoted father to my son, husband to my wife and, above all, a good son to the parents who had done so much for me. This came to be my main task in life. I did it moderately well with my son, pretty well with my wife and well indeed with my parents (with my sister's help). I cared for and paid attention to them in their declining years. I stayed with my father as he got sick, went into extremis and then into a coma and then entered immortality with my sister and me reading him the Psalms.

This was the only point at which my life touched the lives of the soldiers in Iraq or the firefighters in New York. I came to realize that life lived to help others is the only one that matters and that it is my duty, in return for the lavish life God has devolved upon me, to help others He has placed in my path. This is my highest and best use as a human.

Faith is not believing that God can. It is knowing that God will.

By Ben Stein

If we are reflective beings, and I like to believe we all are to some extent, Stein's words should give us some pause as we think about the way we live our lives. Do we live them for ourselves and our own ego satisfaction or for others in service to God?

If we can manage to look at ourselves objectively, a very difficult thing to do, we discover that, in our very best moments, we have no less power than the ability to lay down our lives or set them aside for others. Sometimes this noble altruism of ours is short lived, other times it leads us beyond the neediness and shallowness of our past lives into decisions and ways of living in the future which have depth and even a measure of "holiness" about them.

Now, “holiness” can be a scary thing. We often do not want others to see this quality in us. Having “holiness” does not mean that we act “Holier than thou,” so that we appear to be unbearable fools, but that we act in the manner of Christ. To do this, James Fenagan, suggests in his little book Invitation to Holiness, that we begin to see the world through the eyes of Christ. He writes: “The gift of holiness is in reality the gift of our full humanity. –[it] is received when we are able to see the world in a new way, when in faith we are able to discern and respond to God’s vision of the world through the eyes of Christ.”

We need to give Fenhagan’s words a little thought, for when we are able to see events in life and other people through eyes that are non-judgmental and accepting, the way in which we live and move and have our being is forever changed.

And, that is what our gospel of Christ, the “good news” of Christ, is all about, the process of transformation. A slow process that often finds us staggering forward toward the whole and holy beings we can become. A process that takes most of us a lifetime to begin to accomplish.

This is what our readings are speaking of for this morning. The shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, the good friend does the same for those who need him or her. The focus of life for the shepherd and the friend is not on him or herself. It goes beyond selfish needs and desires and looks at the needs of others. It takes time and practice to transform the way we look at life and all of its possibilities. But, to be true followers of the one we call our Master, we must take up the joys and challenge of such a demanding practice as we move toward new ways of seeing and being. Amen