

Heroes of Faith

Luke 19:1-10 by Patty Friesen (Nov. 3/19)

The month of November begins a month of remembering those who have died. Today is All Saints Day where some churches remember their heroes in faith who have died and we will remember the biblical hero Zacchaeus, and the literary heroines Mary Oliver, Rachel Held Evans and Toni Morrison and a SK political hero Bill McKnight who influenced others in faith and action. Next weekend is Remembrance Day of course. November 24 is our Memorial Sunday where we remember our five members: John Wall, Art Zacharias, Deanna Reddekopp, John Friesen, Bill Braun and other family members who have died this year with candle lighting.

Zacchaeus is an unlikely hero of faith. He is a chief tax collector. Today we trust the Canada Revenue Service isn't skimming personal money off our taxes. But in Roman times, tax collectors regularly did skim for personal gain. Jesus has preached against the likes of Zacchaeus, pronouncing woes upon the rich, who have already received their reward. His occupation places Zacchaeus in the company of the greedy, like the man who wants to tear down his barns to build bigger ones in order to hoard his excesses. Even the crowds recognize Zacchaeus as a sinner, no doubt with a capital S.

Along comes Jesus. He halts the parade that is passing by the sycamore tree and looks up at Zacchaeus, thereby discarding the crowd's labels. By announcing a visit to Zacchaeus's house, Jesus forces the crowd to see this tax collector with new eyes. It is not a pretty sight, apparently, for they cannot stop grumbling about it, and about the fact that Jesus would stoop to sharing hospitality with such a person. Nonetheless, Jesus refuses to be bound by labels. Where they see a cheat, Jesus sees someone redeemable.

Where they see lost, Jesus sees found. Jesus sees Zacchaeus for his faults as well as his potential and still invites himself over for dinner. Hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.

I live in a 800 square foot 1950 house with one bathroom. It's hardwood floors creak with every step and doors need repainting. If Jesus were coming over for dinner, I would want time to clean the place. I would want it to look like we keep a nice house, even if the reality is considerably different.

Zacchaeus has no time to beautify his place, no time to fix a special meal, no opportunity to make his home look like anything other than what it is. Jesus is coming for dinner. Today. Right now. The tax collector cheat is playing host to the redeeming Saviour of Humanity. That is how salvation works. We do not have to put things in order first, because salvation is not about being neat and orderly. It is not about making things look good, not about what we do, not about fitting into the world's stereotypes; it's not about the good or bad labels by which we are known to ourselves or others. Before even announcing his newfound spirit of generosity and restitution, Zacchaeus learns that Jesus is coming to see him. Today salvation has come to his house, because he was seeking Jesus while Jesus was seeking him. It reminds us of the old hymn: I sought the Lord and afterward I knew, He moved my soul to seek him, seeking me; It was not I that found, O Saviour true; No, I was found of thee. (Texts for Preaching, p. 582)

Moved by Jesus' acceptance of him just as he is, Zacchaeus opens his cheating purse and offers to give half of what he owns to the poor and pay back the rest four times what he gained by cheating. An extravagant effort at restitution and reconciliation. Zacchaeus is compared to the rich young ruler from the previous chapter who also sought

out Jesus but who in the end, couldn't be parted with his money. The Gospel of Luke is full of these ironies of those who are low and despised find a place of redemption in the kingdom of God and the righteous sometimes don't. Zacchaeus is an unlikely hero of faith.

A more likely hero of faith is poet Mary Oliver who died this January at age 84. She opened us to wonder and awe at the natural world and trust in the One who created it. While not explicitly Christian in her poetry, she folds in biblical imagery that has nurtured my faith and we have used her poetry in worship. She also helps us look into the face of death without fear as in her poem When Death Comes

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox;

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up having simply visited this world.

Another heroine of faith, Christian writer Rachel Held Evans grew up
fundamentalist Christian and as a young adult began blogging about her questions of faith
and science, the role of women and LGBTQ members in the church. Her first bestseller a
Year of Biblical Womanhood comically took all the passages in scripture about women
literally and revealed to us the dangers of literal interpretation. In Searching for Sunday,
she finds a way back to faith and her last book in our church library is Inspired where she
takes on the beauty and challenges of scripture and faithful living. Rachel Held Evans is
called the CS Lewis of our time and died suddenly this spring at age 37. (CC July/19)

Nobel Prize winning novelist Toni Morrison, who died this year at age 88, is not
often thought of as a religious writer. She is celebrated as a writer on race and culture.
Nonetheless her novels are deeply religious as her characters go deeper into reserves of
faith, concepts of freedom and perceptions of the divine. The question Morrison posed
for herself was this: How can religious identity be rendered in contemporary fiction?
Morrison seeks to communicate through her characters a religious life that is at once
mystical, practical and communal and that leads to spiritual freedom and freedom for her
is never extricable from its social aspects. In America, slavery always hangs in the
background with both its' personal and societal aspects. Morrison shows us that like

Zacchaeus, we are freed by grace from our own blindness to find a place in the world from which we can do some good. (CC Oct.9/19)

Finally, Saskatchewan's Bill McKnight passed at age 79. He spent 14 years as the Member of Parliament for Kindersley-Lloydminster and held numerous cabinet posts, including Indian Affairs. Despite his many cabinet posts, Saskatchewan First Nations remained close to his heart. In 2007 he was appointed as Treaty Commissioner for Saskatchewan. He was a strong proponent of the treaties. Part of his legacy was to create a K-12 school curriculum based on the treaties in Saskatchewan and Canada. Bill McKnight helped form close to one and a half million new acres of First Nations land, including very profitable urban reserves.

He was a decent man who had empathy for others. He and his wife fostered two children from Muskeg Lake and he never mentioned or exploited this relationship, even when he was Minister of Indian Affairs. The Muskeg Lake band council recognized him as an honorary chief and gave him the name "Eagle Feather." Bill McKnight played many roles and had many accolades, but most of all he was a dear friend to Saskatchewan First Nations. (Doug Cuthand, Star Phoenix Oct. 12/19)

We give thanks for Zacchaeus, Mary Oliver, Rachel Held Evans, Toni Morrison and Bill McKnight as their legacies live on to inspire us in faith and action. Let us pray...

Forgiving, loving God, thank you for the gifts of scripture and poetry and life examples we have reflected on this morning and the gift of your acceptance and forgiveness. Help us to seek you while you are seeking us and invite you in even if our house is a mess. Amen.