



Unsung Leaders

Psalm 145; Zechariah 9:9-12; Mat 11:16-30; Rom 7:15-25a

I grew up on various hero tales. I heard tall tales of Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill. I heard stories of bigger than life heroes Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone. I learned of Paul Revere's midnight ride, Washington's rag-tag army, and Patrick Henry's famous declaration of audacity. I heard stories of a western push, settling the frontiers, of railroads, gold rushes, and the industrialization of a nation. I heard less of John Leland, Isaac Backus, Roger Williams and other Baptists who pushed for religious freedom and separation of church and state.

There were always those who were barely mentioned. Then there were the stories that were just not told. I heard of Lottie Moon's missionary efforts in China. I heard of William Carey embarking on a missionary venture to India, though I missed the conflict with the economic interests of colonialism. I heard little of those Baptists, Methodists, and others who took the gospel west along with the population of settlers. I heard nothing of those emigrating to new lands, bearing the gospel of Christ there without the backing of a sending agency.

I heard stories of gold, land, freedom, and economic advancement much more often than stories of faith. I heard far more exploits of war and plunder than a mission of the gospel of Christ Jesus. I heard de-humanizing accounts of enemy populations more than recognition of God's love for them. At church, however, I heard of Christians hiding Jews in their homes in Nazi Germany. I heard of the smuggling of Bibles into Russia. I heard of missionaries and laymen risking their lives to share the gospel in lands officially closed to the gospel of Christ. These heroes most often had no names. They were unknown, unseen, mentioned once, and then seemingly forgotten.

Classroom history focused on wars, generals, presidents, kings, high officials, and major events among similar power brokers. We heard the struggles of settlers pushing west, but not the struggles of the people they displaced. We learned of governments and rulers, but not the people they subjected. We studied generals and strategists, but not the soldiers who died in combat. We learned of railroad magnates, but ignored the hordes of men slaving to lay track in new frontiers. We studied those with power and wealth we envied, but not those who worked day and night to provide for families and build a better community for all.

The real community leaders, however, were those who built hospitals, churches, schools, and waste treatment plants. They were the ones who taught hygiene, nutrition, and better farming methods. They were those whose lives showed the grace and love of Christ Jesus, not the greed for wealth, power, and fame of so many history textbook characters. The real leaders who should have been sung were those who embodied the messages we needed to hear, not simply those we wanted to hear.

Zechariah painted a picture of the wrong kind of kind. His picture was that of a king of peace rather than war. It was the institution of caring for the needs of others, rather than pressing forward our own agendas at whatever cost to our neighbors.

Paul speaks of the internal conflict between knowing what is good and right, and the willingness to do what is right over what we desire. Such is our struggle over the heroes and leaders we sing or leave unsung. Such is our conflict over choosing with chores and tasks to accomplish as we push others

aside. Such is our struggle to arrange our values and live by the ones we know to be of a higher order. We don't like to call it sin, but it is our sinful, selfish orientation that determines who our real heroes and leaders will be. Will they be those who set forth the agendas of our secret or selfish aims, or will they be those who stand for the agenda of Christ Jesus?

Matthew records Jesus' words about God being so often ignored. We will seemingly find some excuse or another to keep God's message and will at bay. John the Baptist was ignored for being too different and strange. Then Jesus was ignored for being too friendly with the sinners of his day. Whatever the excuse, the crowds did not want to hear what God had to say. They had already chosen their own leaders and heroes. They wanted to follow those who had achieved those objectives they considered truly important. At heart, their objective was not to grow closer to God, but to use God to achieve their own objectives in life.

What we fail to see is that our heroes and chosen leaders are rarely satisfied, fulfilled, and content with their successes in life. Power is always limited. Wealth is always finite. Fame is always a moving target. Attention constantly fades. We always crave more, becoming enmeshed in an exhausting cycle of unfulfillment. We know what we want. We determine our aims and objectives. We select our priorities and arrange our lives around those things we deem important and worthy of our time and attention. If we are not careful, we chase dreams as fleeting as rainbows.

Jesus closed his comments our sinful orientation with a call to change the direction of our lives. If we know that our slate of leaders and heroes holds an amalgam of competing aims, objectives, and values, it should be simple to understand that we must choose among them those values we truly take as more important. Competing objectives and values will wear us down. Working after objectives that can never be fulfilling will get us nowhere. Following leaders and heroes with values different from our own can never turn out well.

Jesus offered a choice. He called for a decision. He challenged us to choose a different way of living. It is a way of life in eternal fellowship with God, directed after the aims and values of the gospel of grace, love, and forgiveness.

I remember getting excited about some of those hero stories. They were thrilling to hear as someone achieved power, wealth, or position. There was a deeper sense of fulfillment, however, in the hero stories of others like Corrie ten Boom, William Carey, and Lottie Moon. They were never rich and powerful, but their lives had meaning and impact. John Leland was never prominent in the history books, but he made a difference in our heritage of religious freedom. He did not always display courage in the face of every danger, but he stood on principle for the gospel of freedom in Christ.

Jesus said his burden was easy. That did not mean there was no burden. He called his yoke light, but he called us to accept that yoke nonetheless. It is to a life according to a higher calling. It is to become a different kind of leader or hero than our world applauds. It is to become those unsung leaders in our community who work for the betterment of our community and the incarnation of the gospel of Christ Jesus. We are not called to become the heroes of history collections, but the unsung leaders under the banner of Jesus Christ. When our life stories are written, what will people proclaim of our ideals, aims, and the value of our lives? Will we follow the lead of Christ, even when unsung?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*