
Lighting the Way

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**A sermon by the Rev. George M. Maxwell, Jr.
The Twelfth Sunday After Easter, Proper 14 - Year C**

It has been a good week for one of my heroes.

Dean Smith will receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom. This medal is one of the highest honors that our country bestows on civilians.

Smith was the basketball coach at the University of North Carolina when I was in Chapel Hill.

It's not surprising, I suppose, that he would be one of my heroes.

His success is legendary.

He retired in 1997 after 36 seasons with the Tar Heels, having won 879 games, two national championships, 11 Final Four births, and 13 Atlantic Coast Conference tournament titles.

He directed the U.S. men's basketball team to a gold medal in the 1976 Summer Olympics.

He also changed the face of college basketball.

The next time you see a player raise his fist in a game to indicate that he needs to come out for a rest, or a team gathering at the foul line before a free throw, or a player who just scored pointing to the player that passed him the ball, or the excitement of the home fans on "Senior Day" you should think of Dean Smith.

Those were his innovations.

Choosing heroes, though, is serious business.

In a way, our lives depend on the heroes we choose.

The truth is that we become like the things that we worship.

The preacher who wrote the letter to the Hebrews (and given the power of its rhetoric, the author of the letter must have been a preacher) makes this point in dramatic fashion.

In Chapter 11, he sets out a role call of the heroes of faith. The names are all familiar-Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, Joseph, and Moses.

As if talking to people who need some reassurance, the preacher calls us to imitate these heroes. They have gone before us, and their faith was pleasing to God.

Faith, he says, is "the substance of things hoped for, a proof of things not seen." (11:1)

Notice that I have chosen a translation slightly different from the one in the service bulletin.

It's not that the more common translation in the bulletin is wrong. It's just that I don't think it goes far enough-and, more importantly, neither does Luke Timothy Johnson!

I think the preacher in Hebrews wants to be bolder than that.

The "**assurance** of things hoped for, the **conviction** of things not seen" sounds to me too much like a subjective, psychological feeling.

It's just a sense of confidence about what will happen in the future.

The "**substance** of things hoped for, a **proof** of things not seen" sounds like a bold claim about God.

As Christians, we believe that God is the creator.

That is, we believe that all of the things that we can see have been created by a power that we cannot see. That's why we exist, why there is something and not nothing. And, that's why we believe, without denying the wonders of science, that what we can't see is actually more real than what we can see.

Of course, we don't just believe that God is the creator. We also believe that God will bring this creation to its consummation and reconcile us when we stray from what really matters.

That's why we talk about faith as a response to God, as a way of life.

That's why we say that to be faithful is to live today as if it were already tomorrow.

That's why we say that Christians are ironic people; characters in a developing story that nevertheless already know how it's all going to end.

You can see how these claims about God shaped our heroes of faith by looking at the journey of Abraham and Sarah.

They trusted God enough to leave their home without really knowing where they were going, and they never looked back.

They depended on God for everything that they needed during the journey, including the unexpected, but necessary gift of children.

They never actually got to where they were going, but, in the end, they could see it in the distance.

Yet, they understood that they were responding to a power greater than what they could see, more real than what was available only to their senses.

And, as the preacher tells us, God kept his promise. He sent his Son, who gathered up the pilgrims who had gone before and brought them to the heavenly city they had been seeking.

These are the kinds of heroes that we should choose. They have led the kind of lives that we should imitate. Their virtues shape the character that we should be seeking for ourselves.

The truth is that we will become like the things that we worship.

All of this makes me wonder. Many of these characteristics are more commonly associated with saints, than with heroes. The individual achievements are there, yes. But, there's more. They have walked through the world in a way that creates a path for others.

I realize that I wouldn't even be talking about Dean Smith if he hadn't been such a successful basketball coach. Winning matters, no matter what anyone else tells you.

Yet, he is one of my heroes not just because he won all of those basketball games. It's not just about basketball.

He is one of my heroes because of the way he responded to God in his life.

My poor children suffered through a never-ending bombardment of the lessons that I thought I had learned from Carolina basketball.

Never give up.

Remember how Carolina came back to score those points at the very end to beat Duke.

Learn from your mistakes.

Remember how the point guard made such a bad decision to lose that game in Durham, took the criticism, and then made such good decisions the rest of the way to win the national championship.

Know who you are.

Remember when Dean Smith defended the Carolina player against racially charged taunts of illiteracy by revealing that he had higher SAT scores than the white stars on the other team. We all loved how he put them in their place. But, Smith realized that he had violated a confidence he owed to the other players. He called a press conference and apologized.

It's not just about you.

Remember how Dean Smith retired two months before the start of the next basketball season, leaving his long-time assistant coach with a team loaded with talent. The assistant coach was named the college coach of the year that year, taking the Tar Heels to the Final Four, and winning a school record-tying number of games.

I don't know if all of these lessons were helpful to my children. They rolled their eyes a lot. So, at the very least, the stories may have eased some of the pain and suffering of growing up!

I do know, though, that the lessons taught by Dean Smith were important to me.

I remember that Dean Smith recruited an African-American player to integrate the Carolina team.

I remember that Dean Smith joined a local pastor and a black theology student to integrate a prominent restaurant in Chapel Hill.

I remember that Dean Smith helped a black graduate student purchase a home in an all-white neighborhood.

I remember that Dean Smith stood up to oppose the war in Vietnam.

I remember that Dean Smith took on the Governor of North Carolina to oppose the death penalty, and held basketball practices in North Carolina prisons.

I remember that Dean Smith made those now famous radio recordings promoting a freeze on nuclear weapons.

Dean Smith was a successful basketball coach. Not many can even make a claim to be in his class. But, he is more than that. His life has not been just about self-fulfillment, or achievement, or even excellence.

He seems to have had a purpose, more than just a goal.

I think Dean Smith has always seen himself as a character in a play that was fundamentally about God.

Flex Adler once said,

"The hero is one who kindles a great light in the world, who sets up blazing torches in the dark streets of life for men to see by. The saint is the man who walks through the dark paths of the world, himself a light."

Dean Smith is himself a light.

Amen.