

“Hero (Champion) or Saint? Atticus Finch”

February 13, 2022

The Faith of a Mockingbird series

Media: Week 2 intro - Atticus Finch, then prayer

It’s been a week to talk about champions. The Winter Olympics are captivating us from Beijing. Though I’m not into many winter sports, I love to watch. It’s exciting to watch people reach for a dream that has been long in coming - like snowboarder Lindsey Jacobellis winning a gold medal at 36 years old after waiting 16 years from her first try. It’s even more exciting when we feel connected to them – snowboarder Nick Baumgartner from the U.P. who is the oldest to win a gold medal in the sport and Muskegon’s own Justin Abdelkader playing on Olympic ice for the first time. There are stories of athletes overcoming incredible adversity to participate and succeed and lots of inspiring moments of sportsmanship. Those moments are my favorite part of the Olympics.

Maybe you’re excited about the big game tonight and wondering who will wear the Super Bowl ring. The match-up between the Rams and the Bengals is surprising to many people - two teams coming from behind to make it. Many in Michigan are excited for Matthew Stafford, and many are excited about Burrow. I don’t know much about what to expect, but I can tell you that an estimated 100 million people will watch, and a 30-second commercial costs \$7 million.

I want to be clear that we need champions. There are people who are the best at something. They inspire us to do our best at what we love. We need heroes, too. Especially in the past two years, we’ve used “heroes” to describe many frontline workers, and that’s accurate. If we think about people who are admired because of their courage and good qualities, they are heroes, and we surely need them. They give us hope and call us to do our best for each other. They are a part of God’s work in the world.

Even so, our call from God in the context of the church is a little different than being champions or heroes. We’re called to be saints. When we read Scripture, we don’t hear a call to be heroes, but the word “saint” appears more than 60 times - and many times it’s how Christians are addressed. “To the saints...”

Normally it’s November when we focus on saints - people of faith who have helped us to know God better and helped us to follow God more closely. We’re

thankful for all of the people we've loved and who have loved us - and have taught us in word and deed how to love God and love others. They have been examples of agape love - sacrificial love - and have helped us understand the cost of discipleship and shown us the joy of faith while also being honest about the struggles.

Last week, we focused on Scout Finch, the young narrator whose questions and honesty drive the story of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. But a lot of her life revolves around her relationships, including her father, Atticus. He's a widower raising two children and a well-respected lawyer in the community. He is patient with his children, treating them with respect and explaining things as they are, as best he can, at their level. He is wise and offers important lessons about empathy, respect for others, and compassion.

As a character in literature, Atticus Finch is memorable for all of the right reasons, and his commitment to justice is admirable, even though he won't (he can't) win because of the systemic racism that infects the community. It doesn't hurt that Gregory Peck portrayed Atticus so well, and the story was so powerful for Peck and for Brock Peters, who portrayed Tom Robinson, remained close after filming. Brock offered a eulogy for Peck when he died.

It's interesting to note that author Harper Lee "attended law school, but chose writing as her career, working as an airline ticket agent in New York while making her first efforts at fiction in her spare time. Friends surprised her with a monetary gift that allowed her to focus full-time on her writing, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* was the ultimate result." Lee died in February of 2016 in her hometown of Monroeville, Alabama, and her family was active at the conference level of the United Methodist Church. Lee leaves a story that calls us to explore our place in God's world - and our place in the world as God's people.

The upside-down blessings of Jesus from Matthew 5 challenge us. They may sound strange to us because we speak of blessing as something good or successful many times. And yet the element of agape love that moves through this list is real. The reality of sacrifice is implicit. The truth about our connectedness to one another is evident. When Jesus offers these blessings, they're not simple or trite; they're the true-tested life of faith that navigates hard stuff. In whom do we really trust? What's the compass that guides us in daily life? Jesus' words of blessing point us to God.

Maybe the blessing that rings true in Lee's story the most is about persecution. Atticus certainly faces criticism for defending Tom, but then again, Tom faces it even more simply because of who he is - an African-American man. He'll be our focus next

week. The challenge for us is if we'll hear that blessing from Jesus and know that it's a possibility and even a reality for us. Sometimes Jesus' blessings are difficult to accept.

When was the last time we stood up for what's right - when integrity was our main concern? Integrity has everything to do with our witness as followers of Christ. When our faith calls us to places and decisions that aren't popular or easy, what happens?

And maybe the more difficult question is this: when was the last time we ignored injustice or something questionable because it really didn't affect us? We ignore what doesn't affect us. Atticus agrees to take the case because he's called to defend Tom's innocence, but it's an example doing what's right - and showing strength in sacrifice and even victory in defeat. Those are the ethics that lead Jesus to the cross. Are we willing to keep walking in that direction - even all the way to the cross?

Ultimately that's what saints are praised for. And Paul's words to the early church in Corinth support that call:

(SLIDE) II Corinthians 12: 9-10 (NIV)

⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

We know that Paul experienced all of that as he sought to share the Gospel. It didn't always fall on welcome ears.

We don't think of champions as weak, and in the traditional definition of a hero, weakness isn't something we expect. But when we talk about saints, they are people who seek justice, find wisdom, act with courage and selflessness, and strive for a life rooted in humility, grace, and love - modeled after Jesus. It's a high calling, but it's an important reminder that faith leads us there.

So for some specific differences between a champion or hero and a saint, we go back to the story itself. Pastor Matt Rawle offers some insights. First, *who the story is about?* If we're talking about champion or a hero, then we're usually always focused on that person. Think of your superhero movies. Those stories focus on the hero.

A saint's story is about what God is doing in the world. Atticus is clear that he wants Scout and Jem to learn - and even to avoid catching (in his words) the town's "usual disease of racism." And the story doesn't end with an easy resolution. In fact, it's tragic because justice isn't served and an innocent man suffers and dies. And yet, that's real life, and it happens all the time. How do we keep hope that good will overcome evil - that faith will sustain us?

Why the story is told? Usually in a hero's story, we celebrate the hero and their accomplishments, but a saint's story celebrates faith as a gift and a powerful source of strength and help in times of trouble. Even though Atticus is a fictional character, Lee's development of him and his relationships with others help us to see the kind of courage that God calls us to have. The story points beyond Atticus to the deeper truths about who we are and who we're called to be.

What does the story take for granted? A hero's story includes conflict as a necessary thing to prove that good is stronger than evil. Sometimes that conflict is violent as well. A saint's story usually focuses on non-violence as a way to show that good ultimately wins, even in the midst of conflict. In a powerful scene in the story, Atticus sits in a rocking chair in front of the jail where Tom is housed. He has a lamp on and his newspaper in hand when the townspeople come to take Tom away on their own terms. Atticus refuses to move, and in fact, the children find him, and Scout disarms the men when she recognizes one of them.

When the story goes wrong, what happens? For a hero, success is the only option. The hero has to win. Usually everything depends on it. Superhero movies wouldn't work if our heroes didn't win. For a saint, failure isn't a sign of defeat, but a real possibility. Going back to Paul's words to the early church, counting on and relying on grace to give us strength is the key. Success isn't defined by earthly standards, but ultimately by about what God is doing in the world. Atticus doesn't win. Tom suffers the ultimate consequence of systemic racism. But perhaps something changed because of the trial. Certainly, Lee's story keeps challenging us to see that fighting the good fight of faith is how we seek God's will and way.

So, what do we say about the saints who have pointed us to deeper truths about God and life? Who are the people who have shown us a better way - a more faithful way - even walked the difficult path in faith? Who are the saints who have helped you know God better and live your faith better because they took Jesus' words of blessing seriously - even those upside-down blessings? How do we hold the

brokenness around us and still live with hope that God is at work for good - that God is doing a new thing? Who has helped you be more faithful?

Each week of this series, I'll offer some questions to respond to - including on Facebook - as a way to tell our stories - to think about who we are and whose we are.

(SLIDE) *What have you not said today that needed to be said?*

Some of this story is focused on wisdom and advice that is shared. And as we think about the people whose faith helps to shape ours, here's another question:

(SLIDE) *Whose words matter in your life?*

One of Atticus' moments of wisdom comes when Scout has had a bad day at school and has been in trouble for calling out the plight of a classmate, Walter Cunningham, who comes from a poor family. Scout tries to explain Walter's situation, but gets called out. There's a scuffle on the playground, and Atticus tells Scout that a simple trick will help her get along better with all kinds of people. He says, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

That's the foundation of our faith - and I believe that when Lee wrote those words, she might have been thinking about the Incarnation - that God would love us enough to take on flesh and walk with us in every celebration and sorrow. Jesus isn't a mighty hero, but a loving Savior whose power didn't rest in strength or might, but instead in humility, grace, and ultimately love that goes all the way to the cross - for you, for me, and for the world God loves.

So how will we continue to follow God - with heart, mind, soul, and strength - to love God and neighbor, to look around and remember those who have helped us. How will we be saints for others around us - those who point to God and help others to know God better? Thanks be to God! Amen.