

Great-souled people

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

November 1, 2020

Hebrews 12:1-2

So, you have your favorite radio station on in the background while you're doing whatever you do on Saturday afternoon, and without warning the music stops and a strange voice comes on and says, "The following is a test of the Emergency Broadcast System." Then there is a long, really annoying tone for 35-40 seconds. Finally, the voice comes back on and assures you that "this has only been a test . . ." and tells you what you would have been instructed to do "if there had been an actual emergency."

If this has been a test, we have failed miserably.

You know the saying, "Everything is 20-20 in hindsight"? I want a T-shirt that says, "I can't wait to see 2020 in hindsight."

Politically, we are living in fearful anticipation of what the day after tomorrow holds, and the day after that, and the day after that. Columnist Kathleen Parker predicted that the coming election "could lead to a national nervous breakdown."

Speaking of national nervous breakdowns, Massachusetts General Hospital announced on its website, "The U.S. Census Bureau recently reported that a third of Americans show signs of clinical depression and anxiety." ("Depression on the rise during covid-19." (massgeneral.org June 5, 2020) That was in June, when covid-19 deaths were about half what they are today.

We have learned a lot about ourselves and our fellow Americans in the last nine months, and much of what we have learned has disappointed us. And frightened us.

Not surprisingly gun sales are up everywhere. One hundred and ninety-eight per cent over last year in Michigan. One hundred and eighty per cent in New Jersey.

"We have to defend ourselves," a shopper at the National Gun Show in Virginia told a New York Times reporter. Against whom? That depends on which newly armed shopper you talked to. Protesters, rioters, armed militia, Black Lives Matter. We have to "Be Ready for Anything;" that was the title of a booklet that was for sale at the gun show. Ready for what? Again, it depends on who you talked to. We have to be ready in case of a civil war, one shopper said. We have to be ready because we don't know what will happen if Biden is elected, or what will happen if Trump is elected; what will happen if police are defunded; or what will happen if police are *not* defunded.

"Everybody is arming themselves against their neighbor," said a woman who came to the gun show because all the local gun stores were out of nine millimeter ammunition.

A shopper swept his arms outward, indicating the vast convention center and said, "This is a great room of 'you never know.'" You never know when you might have to shoot somebody.

We keep waiting for a strange voice to come out of the clouds saying, "We now return you to your regularly scheduled program." But we are beginning to wonder whether the regularly scheduled program we remember was a fantasy all along. Maybe the events of 2020 did not change us as much as remind us of who we are and have always been. Anyone remember 1968?

I say if God is going to send some great-souled people, now would be a real good time.

The term goes back to Aristotle. (Bob Baird can fill you in on that.) But it appeared in one of Fr. Richard Rohr's recent daily meditations. I doubt that Rohr had Aristotle in mind. He had his own definition: "*We long for great-souled people who can hold the chaos together within themselves—and give us the courage to do the same.*"

The foundation of our hope, said Richard Rohr, is that even in such a time as this "*such people (great-souled people) have gone before and paved the way for us.*"

On All Saints Day we reflect Hebrews 12:1-2 in our worship, as we have done in litanies today: "*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.*" The "witnesses" the author refers to are the heroes of faith enumerated in the preceding chapter, great faith chapter, chapter eleven.

By faith, Moses. By faith Abraham, and "Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets. . . ." You are familiar with the list.

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews drew on a Jewish tradition of remembering people who held the chaos together in their day and inspired others to do so as well.

The best-known example is from the apocryphal book, the Wisdom of Jesus, son of Sirach (44:1-10), who lived in the second century before Jesus of Nazareth. You may not have heard the entire poem the serves as the introduction, but you know the first line.

*Let us now sing the praises of famous men,
our ancestors in their generations.
The Lord apportioned to them great glory,
God's majesty from the beginning.
There were those who ruled in their kingdoms,
and made a name for themselves by their valor;
those who gave counsel because they were intelligent;
those who spoke in prophetic oracles;
those who led the people by their counsels
and by their knowledge of the people's lore;
they were wise in their words of instruction;
those who composed musical tunes,
or put verses in writing . . .
all these were honored in their generations,
and were the pride of their times.
Some of them have left behind a name,
so that others declare their praise.
But of others there is no memory;
they have perished as though they had never existed;
they have become as though they had never been born,
they and their children after them.
But these also were godly,
whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten.*

I'm not sure how I would define a great-souled person. I find it easier to do if I have someone in mind. I think about Carl Harris, who taught Greek language and literature at Wake Forest for 35 years. While he was a student at Mars Hill College, out

in the mountains near Asheville, he received a medal for “scholarship, character and manners.” Sounds quaint, doesn’t it? But after his death ten years ago, a university publication said, “That just as easily described him 70 years later.”

Words that come to mind when I think of Carl: gracious; of generous spirit; congenitally kind.

In a question and answer session after a lecture, Martin Marty, University of Chicago historian, was asked about the bitter divide in our country between liberals and conservatives. He said, “I no longer divide people into liberals and conservatives. I divide them into mean and non-mean.” I like that.

Carl was one of those people you could not imagine being mean. You’ve known people like that. You can’t imagine them deliberately trying to hurt someone.

That was an important quality because Carl also held strong opinions and voiced them. But always in the gentlest tones. He disagreed but never made enemies. He made judgments about people without being judgmental.

It was easy to get inside his circle and hard to get out.

Carl Harris is what I mean by a great-souled person.

Here’s the interesting thing: in the 23 years that I was pastor of Wake Baptist Church, Carl never served as a deacon, or in any other position of leadership. I can’t recall a single committee he served on. Yet if you asked ten members, Who is the spiritual center, the representative soul of this congregation? nine of them would have said, Carl Harris. In times of turmoil – and there were plenty such times – he held the chaos within himself, enabling and inspiring the rest of us to do so as well.

The foundation of our hope, said Richard Rohr, is that in times of stress and anxiety great-souled have “*gone before us and paved the way for us.*”

Finally, Richard Rohr prayed that “*all of us (might) know such people in our lives.*”

They are still with us, the great-souled people. They are the ones who remind us that our despair is premature, that we’ve been through worse, that we can handle it. They ease our anxiety and walk us through our panic.

All Saints Day is the day to remember and be grateful for the great-souled people who have blessed our lives. I encourage you also to think of those who are with us, to name them, because too often we are not aware of the ways they have sustained us until they are no longer with us. Who are the great-souled people in your life? Who holds the chaos together for you?

Thank God for them. Thank them. Amen.