

“God’s Heroes”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

As I said this week in VBS, the children learned what it meant to be heroes. In the broadest definition the word “to be a hero” is to be a follower of God; to use what God has taught you; to respond to the work of the Holy Spirit and to do good things for others. Sometimes it helps to know what a hero is by the example of other people in the pew. One of the reasons why God’s children were taught to be super heroes is so they can understand you don’t have to be somehow special to be a hero. There are heroes all around us. I want to give you an example today of one of the people who has been sitting in the pew around you for many years who has been a true hero.

Now, her funeral service was yesterday and I want to talk about her not because she is somehow more special than anyone else, but she is a hero just like you and I can be. Her name was Willie Glanton. Now Willie was an amazing person. She epitomized, in many ways, what it was like to be a hero. She was born in a Christian home and knew from an early age that God cared for her because her parents, like so many parents in this room, wanted their little girl to understand that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life.

Already at the age of 11 (How many of you are between the ages of 9-12? Raise your hands. Alright. So somebody just like you, at about your age) she made a decision to become a lawyer. But, everyone told her she couldn’t do it. Even her dad said, “You are a girl; women shouldn’t be lawyers.” She did it anyway. People said, “You are black; you can’t be a lawyer,” but she did it anyway. “You are in the south; and it is the 1940s [actually the 1930’s], you can’t be a lawyer,” and she did it anyway. Part of being a hero is knowing in your heart - and she knew at age 11 - that God was calling her to be a lawyer, and she followed that path her entire life.

Willie was an African American woman in a time when it was hard for a person of color to have opportunities. It was 10 times harder to be an African American woman. Willie knew that to be a hero of God you had to have a good education, so I want all of the kids to listen today. Even in the moments when school can be a little boring, that is one of the ways that you develop, becoming a hero. She studied hard all of her life, She graduated from high school in Hot Springs, Arkansas; she graduated from college at Tennessee State University and she graduated from Robert H. Terrell Law School in Washington, DC. Willie was such a super hero that she was the second African American woman to pass the Iowa Bar and become a lawyer, the second woman. She, just three years later, became the first African American woman to serve as the Polk County Assistant District Attorney. Then in 1964 Willie again became a first, the first African American woman to be elected to the Iowa House of Representatives. It required African American and white votes in 1964 to get her elected.

Willie was a hero, not just for the African American community but for all of us, helping us understand that all things are possible - that’s part of what makes us a hero, when we do things that people say aren’t possible. And for you, kids, there are people all around just like Willie sitting in these pews who have done things that other people said were not possible, and they are your example today. When Willie was in college she met this really

handsome guy named Luther Glanton. He saw her at a school event, leaned over to a friend and said, "Wow! I'm going to marry that woman." He had never met her, but she was so pretty. What he realized very soon was, while she was pretty on the outside, she was even more beautiful on the inside. What he found - and why one of the great reasons why he married her - was that he respected her. I have so much respect for Luther because, when he was a young man - and this is hard for kids to understand today - most men and especially in his community believed that women were supposed to stay home and take care of their men. And Luther, like Willie, was someone who saw into the future and was far ahead of her time. Luther was the same way. He wanted a wife who he could respect, who he could cherish, who he could talk to about politics, who he could have discussions with about any number of issues and she would know just as much as he did. They were happily married because they enjoyed each other, respected each other and wanted to make the other one better, stronger and more faithful. And everything they did they did together.

Like I said, in 1964 she became the first African American woman to be elected to the Iowa House of Representatives. But in 1962 - two years before that - President Kennedy called them and asked Luther and Willie Glanton to be representatives for the United States - to go to Africa. While they were in Africa, this was right at the time when colonialism in Europe was backing away from Africa and, all of a sudden, you had all of these African countries that were becoming independent. But they were not sure how they wanted to function and how they would rule. So President Kennedy invited Luther and Willie together - both lawyers - to go to Africa and to teach the people there what democracy is like, how to organize a legal system that is free and fair. Over and over again over four years they went back and forth from the United States to Africa, country after country touched, moved and blessed by Luther and Willie. It was hard and they had to sacrifice much - but that is what heroes do.

When people heard that I was going to do Willie's service, they stopped me on the streets all over town and said, "Let me tell you about Willie." One person stopped me and she said, "The thing that impressed me the most about Willie and Luther was the fact that over their lifetime they could have made so much more money." Now they made a good living, but they could have done so much more if their primary goal was making a dollar; but they sat down as a young couple in 1951, when they were married, and they said, "The people we want to be are people who are committed to God and committed to our community, providing social justice and hope for everyone." Imagine that as a mission statement for a marriage. So the two of them went and they did that. They sacrificed at times what they made for a living to serve their community, and they did it in so many ways.

Luther Glanton, as many of you know, had another first. He was the first African American judge in the state of Iowa - both as a municipal judge and at the county level. An amazing man. The two of them did everything they could to care for and support their community, but they always did it together.

Super heroes often have a side kick. Who was Batman's side kick? That's right, Robin. Now I have a really hard one for you. Who was the Green Lantern's side kick? Kado. That's right. Luther was Willie's sidekick and they did it together, combating evil and bringing hope and life.

Luther and Willie, as I said, intentionally served their community. Luther and Willie remained humble in their approach even though they had done all of these things, and so many more that I don't have time to explain. They always acted as if they were just another person in the pew, just another person in the community - always available to anyone who was willing to talk to them or care for them. They were never too big for their area or their community. Even though one week they might be on the cover of Ebony magazine and another week on the cover of Jet magazine, they were in the newspapers; they were all over the place - they were just another person wanting to help. That is part of being a super hero - not being arrogant, but being humble enough so it's about everyone else and not you.

Heroes also face evil head on. If that isn't the definition of a hero! They face evil no matter how scary and, with God's help, they overcome it. What Willie had to face throughout her life - and Luther - but what Willie in this example had to face was prejudice, because Willie was an African American woman, before during and after the Civil Rights movement and continuing all through the "black lives matter" movement of today, Willie experienced a great deal of prejudice. She faced racism and other adversities with grace and dignity. She never lost her temper. She always responded with the right words at the right time, because she had a Christian heart that guided her every step of the way.

I was reading an article and it said that despite being a woman raised in the south, Willie rarely speaks of discrimination and prejudice. Willie was quoted as saying, "We were taught at home that you get the best education you can get. That the way you overcome a lot of prejudice is to not overhaul it all and not over worrying about it. You just have to take the time and stop fussing about discrimination. Get the best education you can and move forward."

That 1964 newspaper article, while she was running for the State Legislature, described Willie as facing racism head on. I didn't like the way the article was written or how it was described, but I loved Willie's response. The article said, "But she, Willie, deplors the inevitable speculation that she was running just to prove [and this is 1964] a Negro can be elected."

Willie responded, "I think the only way to combat that -" and then she stopped and began again. "I would hope that the substance of what I have had to say would take care of that." Instead of being angry she stopped and reframed and spoke with the dignity and respect that made people listen. Heroes never give away their dignity and self-respect. Heroes demand subtle respect and the ability to speak in a way that will require people to listen.

People always heard the substance of what Willie said. When you are struggling and people are not hearing the truth do not give up. Heroes do not give up. Willie did not give up. Continue to strive and trust in God's truth because a new day will dawn. In 1951 Willie started her life with Luther. They couldn't have imagined all of the firsts they would do, all of the differences they would make, but they put one foot in front of the other; they made most of each day. And they never forgot their mission to give their very best for God, to love their community, and to care for each and every one.

The seeds of faith that she sowed influenced Westminster's ongoing commitment to social justice today. When we walk in the Gay Pride Parade and we have our booth there, we do that because of the example of people like Willie Glanton. When we talk about immigration

and refugees and we study to see what the Sanctuary movement is like, we do that because of people like Willie Glanton and her command in and demand for social justice as the fulfillment of Scripture. When God is calling you to be a hero, know that it will not be easy. Being a hero never is. When you are called to be a hero, it means having a faith in God and trusting that the Holy Spirit will help you. It is never too late and there are no limits. You break limits as a hero.

If Willie can be a hero with all of her firsts so can you. Be a lifelong learner. Place your trust in God and love the people around you. That is how we do it. Let's get started. Amen